Astray

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Astray

by museix

Summary

He would walk until he couldn’t; he would walk until he was far enough away.

At last, Will stopped tracing his fingers along the slit between bricks as he shakily exhaled out in relief.

A tent.

Or :

A homeless Will settles underneath what he thinks is an abandoned tent. Hannibal finds a person underneath the tent instead of his stray cat, for whom he leaves behind a scarf for. His help, however, always seems to be refused by the stubborn.

Will returns the scarf only to find it back into his hands, this time, with his initials stitched onto the end.

Perhaps by the courtship through tableaus, might Will learn who he is to the Ripper.

When the Red String

Chapter Notes

chapters following this will be longer (~5.5-6k words per chapter)

"Hey kid, get off the streets. Looks like it's gonna be a big one tonight," a gruffly voice spoke out from above.

Will's head dipped onto his shoulders before being woken up with a start. The relentless wind of the snowstorm whipped his hair back as he shrunk into his jacket, which was many layers too thin. Will winced at the flashlight pointed onto his face before trying for a reply.

"Right," Will weakly croaked, only being able to manage a word in response.

It was the season of snow, blankets of crystals powdering the trees, cars and roads. However beautiful, it was crude. The holes in Will's socks and gloves made it hard enough for him to endure the cold. His jacket was fished out of a trash can, with holes that Will sewed shut with a needle and some string.

"What're you doin' out here anyways kid?" asked the officer once again, unceremoniously flashing the light onto Will's face.

"Got lost," mumbled Will, bowing his head from the incessantly protruding light. It was a poor excuse, but the already limited energy Will had was draining. His one meal a day came from a café, where the manager was kind enough to offer him breakfast daily. The other times, he was limited to fishing through trash.

More than his annoyance at this situation, Will fought the rising urge to correct him. His thoughts threatened a venomous tone, like an agitated cobra, spreading its hood in warning.

I'm not a kid. Not anymore. Never again, not anymore.

The officer raised his eyebrows, skeptical of Will's dismissive answer. A painful silence strung the air to which Will tried to cut short in vain. The injured man attempted to hoist himself up to which he immediately regretted doing so, clutching onto his rib that never properly healed.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Blue and purple bruises stained his thinning waist, as he was a recent victim of a mugging and unkind gestures, to say the least. Will involuntarily took a gasp, trying to steady his pained and erratic breathing. The iniquitous air stung his lungs cold and his nose red. His

fingertips were numb from the snow, his body warmth providing the bare minimum for survival.

“Hey kid, you alright?” interrogated the officer, in suspicion rather than concern.

Will narrowed his eyes, both angry at himself and the officer, forcing the disgusting and bitter taste of anger back.

Not a kid anymore.

He didn’t need someone to reel any unnecessary memories to the surface, and he especially didn’t need anyone’s help.

Everything comes with a price.

“I’m fine,” sharply insisted Will, his ire slowly trickling into into his words.

Will gasped, bellowing traceable bouts of his breath into the air as he palmed against the wall to push himself up. At last, he was successful. Will sheepishly adjusted his broken glasses, callowly fixed with duct tape, as he avoided eye contact with the officer. He shifted more of his weight onto the wall, groping it for support as he turned to walk away.

But before he had the opportunity to, the officer spoke again.

“You got somewhere to go?”

“Yes,” hastily lied Will, determined to lose the officer.

The only place Will was able to go was his “home,” which was raided, through which he was forced to stifle his pained sobs. He was even lucky to be left with the clothing on his body, as he curled on the floor clutching his waist, wheezing for air.

Will shook his head, trying to dismiss the burrowing thought. There was nothing he could do.

Like always.

And if the officer called out again to Will, he didn’t hear it. He wouldn’t have turned back either. It didn’t matter anymore.

Will felt the stream of his warm tears flowing out of the corners of his eyes as he forcefully wiped away at them. He felt vulnerable. It was disgusting and nauseating, the way his defense was eroding away. He shivered at the feeling rather than the cold, feeling naked as the wall crumbled.

Will trudged through the snow, stoically ignoring the squelching feeling of his wet socks pushing against the sole of his boots. He would walk until he couldn’t; he would walk until he was far enough away.

At last, Will stopped tracing his fingers along the slit between bricks as he shakily exhaled out in relief.

A tent.

It looked like it didn't belong to anyone, as it was free from belongings. It wasn't exactly a tent which Will could climb into, but it provided enough shelter for him to dwell under. At least for the night.

The street lamps accentuated the unique crystalline structure of the snow as Will sat down, shifting his weight onto the wall behind him. He sighed out in relief as his shoulders went lax, closing his eyes to the crude, yet melodic howling of the wind.

Will's curls followed his head, as it dipped into an uncomfortable position, leaning his chin onto his chest. He would certainly wake up with a sore neck tomorrow, but it didn't matter. It felt almost comforting, that maybe he had a home.

—

"Hm?" quietly hummed Hannibal, slightly canting his head at the unexpected sight. Nevertheless, an amused tone was weaved into his voice as he crouched down to look at the inhabitant.

It was unmistakable. There was a human underneath the tent he had constructed for a stray cat. Hannibal was never fond of animals but he eventually gave in to the black cat which sat by his Bentley just outside his office.

The cat was always prompt with his return and seemed rather tame, to which Hannibal reluctantly accepted. It was tame, but not to be mistaken with domesticated. More often than not, it would fend for itself by catching rats, leaving grizzly remains underneath the tent. It was after this Hannibal found amusement in the cat, checking up on it periodically. Moreover, the few times Hannibal (hesitantly) stroked the cat, it would lean into his hand, letting out low rumbles.

At a shallow observation, the human had chocolate brown curls that laid on top of his glasses, wearing a painfully thin jacket. As Hannibal leaned closer to examine who exactly was underneath his tent, he heard the labored and ragged breathing.

His lungs or perhaps his ribs?

His face was littered with cuts and scars, which his arms would undoubtedly harbor. His face was amateurishly shaved, like it was performed in haste. His curls were messily bunched up in some areas, leaving the rest to flay in the wind. His wrists were too thin for the age Hannibal assumed Will to be.

Most likely around his early 30's.

Hannibal slightly cringed at the position of Will's head to which he gently shifted. Hannibal's fingertips gently picked up Will's chin, leaving his cheek to lean on his shoulder. Will only

managed a couple of weak guttural hums, not waking up from Hannibal's touch.

Almost instantly, Will's breathing deepened as his knitted eyebrows slowly untangled. His chest rose and plunged rhythmically, as he murmured short of a couple words.

"Let me g-"

Will shifted in his spot, unparalleled to the thrashing he was doing in his dream — no, nightmare. He incessantly kicked and tried to pry his wrist free of the fingers that shackled onto him.

Before Hannibal got up to leave, his contemplation led him to tilt his head forward, drawing his hands to unravel the scarf around his neck. It was a beautiful shade of crimson red made of cashmere, which he draped over Will.

As soon as Will started to calm his breathing, Hannibal palmed his knees to stand up. The stinging cold of winter was nothing new to him as his hair parted in the wind. He shifted his weight onto his feet, turning to walk away from his new stray.

—

Morning followed as Will woke up startled, fumbling the surrounding ground. He gingerly reached up to his face, feeling for his glasses, which were still sitting on the bridge of his nose. Will sighed in relief, slightly fogging his glasses.

This was a nice spot to stay in, he decided, before snorting at the fact that his standard for a "nice spot" was equivalent to "not getting mugged." Will's teeth-chattering and body-shivering woke him up entirely as he instinctively reached up to rub his biceps from the cold.

Before reaching his arms, his fingertips brushed up against an unfamiliar feeling. It was soft to the touch. Will's heart slightly jumped, not knowing what he had just felt upon.

The sun was a helpful indicator as it slightly peeked above the horizon, giving away the deepening color of the scarf. Will shakily exhaled in awe, his fingers trembling as they ran over the material of the item.

A scarf.

The stitching of the scarf was done by hand, given away by the way the ridges dipped and rose with perfection. The fine point of the needle weaved up and through the scarf with utmost precision, which certainly no machine could do. As Will ran his palm over the scarf, his breathing hitched, accompanied by his widening ceruleans.

The material.

The material of the scarf was unmistakable. The delicate texture of the scarf felt like melted gold in his palms, folding around the structure of his hands. It was light, yet ridiculously warm.

"C-cashmere," whispered Will to himself, with a tremble entwining into his words.

Will eyes flashed anger for a second, disgusted by the thought of pity, before melting into concern. This was too expensive to be left for him on purpose.

It wasn't left for me.

Ignoring the deliberate positioning of the scarf, which was tucked behind his shoulders, Will shook his head at the thought of this being anything more than incidental. The notion of being unconditionally cared for was unfathomable anyway as it was promptly drowned and buried. It always felt like Will owed something every time he received anything, knowing the feeling of debt like it was tattooed onto his palm as a reminder, consequences littered about his body.

His eyebrows knitted as he tried to hold onto the scarf with minimal force, afraid that his misfortune would follow anything he touched. Will arduously groped against the wall to hoist himself up, trying to push himself up with a support. He plastered his hand onto his rib, exhaling a gasp in pain as he tucked the scarf into his jacket pocket. He knew who to visit.

—

As he pulled the wooden handles of the door open, a warm rush of air and the comforting smell of pastries flooded out the door. It was nostalgic, although it wasn't anything similar to anything Will has experienced in his childhood. He shook his head, trying to lose the worm that was inhibiting his thoughts, shuddering on the verge of remembering.

As the bell on the door lightly jingled, Beverly perked up and peered towards the entrance, calling out Will's name, like always. It was always in a welcoming tone, accompanied by a warm smile rather than a pitiful one, which made Will feel comfortable in the solacing space.

"Will!" called out Beverly in her usual enthusiasm, drawing the attention of a couple of customers.

Will ducked into his jacket to hide from the looks of the other customers as he sheepishly shuffled towards the counter. Before Beverly turned around to gather the items for his tray, she eyed the scarf which was practically begging to be stolen.

"Did you end up in a dumpster of Wall Street or Beverly Hills?" lightly teased Beverly, humoring Will.

"Neither," snorted Will in return as he exaggerated his eye roll, shuffling onto the seat nearest to Beverly. He allowed himself to bask in the warmth of the cafe as he crossed his arms on the counter, tensing his shoulder trying to take up minimal space. His cheeks dipped into his arms as his cheek fat barely touched his glasses.

Beverly filled his tray with freshly made pastries and a large cup of hot coffee, sneaking a large chocolate chip cookie and a cinnamon sugar cookie onto it as well. He began his usual protesting as soon as he saw her reach into the oven for a cookie.

"Take it back," began Will, as he raised his head to begin his protest.

“No can do,” shrugged Beverly as she teasingly clicked the tongs together, reaching for a third cookie.

“Wait-,” intervened Will, before Beverly suddenly whipped her head back around.

“Hey, let me see that scarf,” requested Beverly, holding out her hand. She had recognized the deep, wine red color as it was unique to just one person.

“Uh yeah, sure,” hesitantly started Will, before shaking his head at his own reluctance.

It doesn’t belong to me. It isn’t mine.

Will drew his hand out of his pocket to hand Beverly the scarf, to which she immediately flipped over behind the counter.

There it was. She traced her finger over the barely noticeable stitch. *H.L.* Beverly gave a little snort as the image of tagging everything he owned came up in her mind.

However, this situation felt a little too coincidental to be true as she skeptically raised her eyebrow at Will, accompanied with a non telling grin.

“That’s actually what I came to you for,” started Will, before being interjected by the way Beverly’s eyes glinted with renewed enthusiasm.

“Speak of the devil,” spoke Beverly as her grin grew wider.

“Boss!” called out Beverly, waving her arm towards the door.

Boss?

Will whipped his head to follow Beverly’s gaze as his eyes came to meet the man who walked in. He was stunning. A dark maroon haloed his irises as his unbuttoned overcoat drifted behind him, making him look tall and protective. His hair was as neatly parted as his steps, a beguiling sense of confidence causing Will to involuntarily stare. He smoothly approached the counter, deliberately pulling out the seat next to Will.

“That’s your boss?” whispered Will, half in awe and the other half in attraction.

“Miss Katz, must I remind you that misnomers are the catalysts to misunderstandings?” crooned an earthy voice. His foreign accent caused a quiver to run up Will’s spine, unsure how someone could sound even better than they looked.

“Hannibal, you could seriously be my boss. You’re the only reason this café still sees the light of day,” reminded Beverly, rolling her eyes.

“Perhaps it was Lady Luck who paid a visit.”

“As the Reaper knocked? Credit lies where it’s due,” quipped Beverly with a slight hum to her voice. She flashed a roguish smile as she propped her chin up on her wrist, diverting her attention to Will.

The Will who sat by the counter scarfed down his chocolate filled croissant. As usual, it had a golden crunchy shell and was oozing with chocolate on the inside, which when paired with coffee, made the perfect breakfast. However, he had no time to enjoy his breakfast today. He finished it in haste, ready to swing his leg over the chair to leave. He was out of place, for a lack of better articulation. The café had a beautiful interior, and a hazy atmosphere.

“Leaving so soon?” spoke Hannibal, slightly turning his head to face Will, accompanied with a negligible smile quirked up on the corner of his mouth.

Will choked on his words as he attempted to unjumble the string of his thoughts, not wanting to make a fool of himself. His accent sent a wave of shivers up Will’s spine as a blush blossomed on his pale cheeks.

“Y-yeah,” stammered Will, nervously sliding the palm of his hands along his thighs.

Beverly groaned in frustration as she watched Will dart his eyes from Hannibal to the floor and back. In an attempt to save him from this situation, she reached back beneath the counter and pulled the scarf out.

“Will, I believe this belongs to you,” remarked Beverly.

Will tried to find something to distract himself, as it would be better than accidentally making a fool of himself in front of Hannibal. His attention slowly drifted towards the television, as he involuntarily fleshed out any surrounding sounds and spurs of conversation. He took down gulps of his coffee, emitting a slight sigh of satisfaction at the warmth of the bitterly sweet coffee tracing his neck and down into his stomach.

“The Chesapeake Ripper has claimed three more victims, gutting and wrenching their hearts out. Several pieces of the victims still remain unaccounted for, including a kidney and a liver,” relayed the news anchor.

Beverly grimaced at the gruesome images that flashed onto the TV, trying again to catch Will’s attention. However, Will’s eyes only had room for the television and his head only had room for veneration. Will’s eyes glinted in slight reverence at the television, admiring the beauty behind the brutality of the bodies that were presented post mortem.

“I should switch the channel. I couldn’t stand another repeat of the Christmas radio but this is worse,” started Beverly, before Will shook his head.

“The Ripper is misunderstood. There’s something so strangely meticulous about his presentations, it’s like the bodies are being displayed as a higher form, like-like art. He’s elevating them from who they were before,” slightly whispered Will with his last addition.

An unfamiliar feeling of warmth pooled in Hannibal’s stomach as feelings of fondness and curiosity grew. The feelings vined from his heart to the rest of his body, especially being reflected in his eyes. Hannibal’s eyes softened as a silver glint peppered his eyes, giving him the look of pure infatuation and amusement. His lips slightly drew up in a smile, exhaling a little, as he fixed his gaze on Will. Hannibal tried to meet eyes with the mellow ocean ones, which were fixed on the table in front of him, buried behind the dark shadow of his eyebags.

Will awkwardly adjusted his broken glasses as he dryly coughed, trying to comprehend his own justification for the Ripper's murders.

"B-but yeah it isn't r-really necessary to go so far," hastily added Will, suddenly cringing at his own words.

Will cautiously peeked out the corner of his eyes to sneak a look at Hannibal, afraid that his words may have warranted disconcerting looks from Hannibal. However, as quick as he peeked, he looked away, avoiding Hannibal's eye contact.

"A-anyways Beverly, I wanted to stop by in case you knew who it might've belonged to. There's probably a good chance given the popularity of this cafe." stammered Will, trying to calm his raging blush from his own embarrassment.

A smile laced in mischief replastered itself onto Beverly's lips as she gave a curt nod of her head, accompanied by a shrug. A sheen of tease slightly shadowed her eyes as she responded.

"I do know who it's from," nonchalantly stated Beverly, in a matter of factly tone.

"Return it for me then," hastily exhaled Will as he slightly pushed himself out from under the counter.

"You don't want to know who it's from?" asked Beverly, a little disappointed.

"Nope," affirmed Will, knowing that he wouldn't be able to shake off the feeling of being indebted once he knew who it was from.

"Will, do you not believe that you deserve to possess such an item?" suddenly inquired Hannibal, although it was asked more in the tone to confirm rather than question.

Bingo.

Hannibal's question struck a pang in Will's stomach as he shakily exhaled a breath, parting his lips to deny Hannibal's claim.

"Just doesn't belong to me," dismissively answered Will, not wanting the probing questions to continue. There was nothing else he needed nor wanted to add.

"Doesn't it?" Hannibal asked.

"Course it doesn't, I wouldn't be living on the streets if it did," sharply reinstated Will, trying to ground his words. Will hastily cut into his following words before Beverly would get a chance to agree with Hannibal or offer parrot talk.

"J-just return it back to whoever it belongs to. I'll see you around, Bev," awkwardly waved Will, in robotic movements, before offering a farewell to Hannibal as well.

"See you sometime around," said Will, hesitating before he added in a whisper, "if we ever meet again."

As Will briskly walked out the café with his head down, Beverly sighed in Hannibal's direction.

"Didn't take you to be such an inexperienced lover, Boss. With all your money and good looks?" playfully commented Beverly, strewn with an exaggerated tone of pity and dejection, as she handed Hannibal his scarf.

Hannibal neatly folded back up his scarf, not offering any insight to Beverly's comment.

"You know he's totally into you, right?" began Beverly, a glint of mischief glossing over her eyes.

"Miss Katz, the signs of loneliness coincidentally align with incessant matchmaking," smoothly replied Hannibal, crossing his leg underneath the counter.

"Hey! That was totally uncalled for," grumbled Beverly, not wanting to admit that he was partially correct.

"Logic prevails, isn't that right Miss Katz?" quoted Hannibal, enticing Beverly to continue digging a grave for her argument.

"Ugh, I get it," groaned Beverly, exaggerating her feigned frustration.

Hannibal let out a slight apathetic exhale as he pushed himself out from underneath the counter, earning a few stares in his direction.

"Leaving already, Boss? Don't forget..," began Beverly, dragging out her words. "Takes two to tango," she winked, accompanied with a gesture indicative of something suggestive.

Hannibal ignored Beverly—both her words and signs—as he walked out the door of the café. He would deviate from his schedule tonight, perhaps even make a permanent change in his office hours from now on, all to accommodate for the stubborn.

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The unforgiving wind lashed at Will's unguarded face as he began to trudge back to the tent. Will felt lighter without the scarf, yet his heart sank like lead, dipping into his stomach. A feeling he knew all too well, yet couldn't describe.

Doesn't belong to me. Wasn't for me.

Emitting another short sigh into the air, his stoic pacing promptly took him down to the street that housed the tent, where he would stay for the rest of tonight.

December 24th, meaning tomorrow is Christmas.

This would be the first Christmas he spent without a home and without the warmth of company. Will bitterly laughed before making a sharp right into the alley. A dejected sigh floated out of him as he sat himself down underneath the tent, before brushing against something besides him. Will's heart slightly jumped as he was finally able to make out what

was there. He immediately backed away from what seemed like a corpse of a rat before his curiosity urged him to examine it further.

The bite wound seemed to penetrate directly into the neck, giving the predator a swift, yet only necessary advantage. The bite seemed like it was a clean one as well, like a sharp puncture wound. Will huffed an amused laugh at his instinct to dissect the crime scene preceding a corpse, only this time it belonged to a rat.

A cat. A clever one.

Feeling slightly tired, Will dipped his forehead onto his bunched knees to try and gather the most of his body heat. The weight of his eyelids overpowered most of his other wills as he slowly drifted to sleep, slightly exhausting the tension in his shoulders.

Tangles and Pulls Taut

Chapter Notes

Updating on biweekly basis (subject to change).

Celebrating Christmas could be unrealistic at times. It required first of all, a home, to which Will snorted at. Already failing to meet the first requirement, Will trudged through the snow in hopes of warming himself up in a store.

It wasn't unusual for Will to skip past the café as he didn't want to seem like a regular charity case. It took him some time to feel comfortable with accepting food from Beverly, but nevertheless, he was grateful for her. Today, he decided to skip past the bakery. With it being Christmas, it would be packed with people that only prodded Will with judgment and looks of disgust.

The relentless whips of wind continued to lash at Will's face as he tried to bury himself underneath his jacket. Proving to be in vain, Will forced the hood over his head and held it in place, sacrificing the warmth his hands would feel. It didn't help that he tended to run cold either.

Upon remembering Beverly's words, "Don't die or I'll dig you out of your grave to kill you myself," Will exhaled in fondness. It had been a while since someone genuinely cared for him and the feeling was enough to keep him warm. Taking Beverly's words into actual consideration, Will decided to stop before a supermarket.

This was it. A rush of warm air flooded out from inside the supermarket as Will grabbed its metal handle to pull open. It wasn't exactly a nice place, but it would help Will blend into the atmosphere. He settled himself in the corner of an aisle before deciding to move around in an attempt to warm up.

His mindless wandering seemed to continue until he stopped in front of the aisle of alcohol, reminiscing about the previously celebrated Christmases. Will ached for the fiery feeling of whiskey to warm him up as he could only afford to trace the coins in his pocket.

Sighing, he walked away from the aisle, taking small steps to the next aisle. The supermarket wasn't exactly big, with Will reaching the last aisle within 20 minutes of being there. The corner of the last aisle looked like a good place to stay as Will confirmed his decision and sat down.

It wasn't long before Will snapped out of his momentary nap, drowsiness from the warmth threatening his hiding spot. He didn't want to be chased out like a rat, having to endure more

looks of distaste. Slowly rising from his spot, he used an aisle shelf to help himself up. He tugged down his jacket and shoved his hands back into his pockets, getting ready to leave.

As Will walked through the aisles, he decided to slow before the alcohol once more. Surprisingly, there were no bad memories associated with him and alcohol, or at least, none he could think of. Except for his father.

Stop thinking about him he's nothing to you now.

Beneath his feelings of contempt, a heavy lingering feeling seemed to dwell. It wasn't really anything Will could explain, but he didn't exactly bother with trying to chase away the feeling. He slowly traced his fingers past the myriad of bottles whilst waking out of the aisle.

As Will extended his arm to push open the door, a sudden hand latched onto his shoulder. On instinct, he pulled back defensively and glared at the security guard, whose hand was firmly pressed to his shoulder.

"Let me leave, I didn't do anything," snarled Will, narrowing his eyes.

A woman closely stood by the door, whispering to the security guard as he nodded. Will glared in her direction, finally catching sight of the catalyst of this situation.

It took all of his willpower to suppress a groan and eye roll because he wasn't new to this. There was a reason it took him time to start visiting Beverly more than once a week. Not to mention the ridiculous sign she posted in front of her store that read, "Missing : Will Graham. Call this number if spotted."

"I didn't steal from your store let me go," aggressively repeated Will.

"I'm afraid we can't do that sir," cautiously replied the security guard as he forcefully herded Will back into the store.

With more force this time, Will tried to push his way through the security guard and out the door. He felt hands leaving his shoulders only to latch onto his wrist, which promptly lurched him back in the store.

"I didn't-" cut off Will, amidst his yelling.

"Unhand him," interrupted a man.

The stranger's voice immediately rang bells of familiarity in Will. It was unforgettable; the coarse and earthy voice which was coated in his foreign accent. Immediately, Will's cheeks felt like they caught fire, which he was sure was fueled by shame and embarrassment.

My timing's just fucking great.

Hannibal had to not only see him under these circumstances, but help him. Which Will should be able to get himself out of.

“Dr. Lecter, I’m sorry, but we can’t do that,” spoke the security guard, relaying his words in an overcompensating amount of respect. Will grimaced at the change in tone as he bit his tongue from making a brash remark. It was tempting.

“I believe your job requires you to resolve conflicts, not flame misunderstandings, Mr. Kith,” Hannibal coolly said.

The security guard shot Will a look which he knew all too well. A concoction brewed of skepticism and a hint of shock. Will pulled back his wrist with a snarl as he briskly walked outside the door, shrinking as the cool air hit his bare neck. Avoiding eye contact with Hannibal, Will walked with his head down, before banging straight into someone.

“O-oh sorry,” began Will, adjusting his glasses before a feeling of dread settled into the pit of his stomach.

“They let you walk out of there, huh?” interrogated the woman.

Just my fucking luck.

“I-,” started Will as he felt his own jaw clenching in anger. He released the tension in exhaustion as he exhaled a groan.

“That was terribly rude, Miss Grethe. What’s to be done about that?” hummed an ever so familiar voice behind Will.

Will followed the voice as he whipped his head around to meet Hannibal. Beyond his looks, Will’s attention drifted over to his clear and refined wardrobe. He was wearing a three piece suit.

A three piece suit? To a supermarket?

A short bark would’ve escaped from Will if he hadn’t held in his laugh. He looked out of place, even more so than Will at the cafe. However, he realized that his attempt at holding in his laugh must have not been enough if Hannibal slightly canted his head at Will’s direction.

“I- uh,” stammered Will, sheepishly avoiding Hannibal’s look, feeling beyond mortified.

“Will, I prefer that you say what is on your mind, for silence and its counterpart, curiosity, may drive a man mad.”

“You just don’t look like you belong at a place like this. Shouldn’t you be shopping at a Whole Foods?” remarked Will, before immediately regretting his words.

He couldn’t make himself seem any less grateful and pretentious at his status. Feelings of shame and regret suddenly teemed at Will, as he shrunk into his jacket.

“I believe that I am most altruistic when I share the fruits of my butchery, Will,” smoothly replied Hannibal.

Boss, doctor, and butcher?

“You’re a butcher?” asked Will, feeling his own eyebrows drawing up in surprise.

“Not professionally,” replied Hannibal with a barely noticeable sheen of curiosity glossing his eyes, obviously amused.

“So what makes your butchery different?”

“The ethicality behind which I select and slaughter animals is something I deem of importance.”

“Right,” murmured Will in an inaudible voice as his apology seemed to tangle and knot in a lump. There was too much he wanted to apologize for.

“A-anyways Hannibal, sorry you had to do that earlier I-I should’ve been able to ..,” trailed off Will as he fidgeted with his glasses. His apology felt insincere, and if he was anything but a fool in Hannibal’s eyes, it would be due to his dumb luck.

“There are simply things you cannot expect to control. An example of such is people,” spoke Hannibal.

Will slightly hummed in consideration and not exactly in agreement, before hastily outing, “Thank you again, but I should really get going.”

He couldn’t—or rather didn’t want to—imagine what Hannibal was really thinking beneath what he said. Will shakily exhaled as he felt his Adam’s apple nervously bobbed against the skin of his neck.

Before Will could turn on his heel to walk in the opposite direction, Hannibal opened the passenger door of his heated Bentley. A rush of warm air flowed out as Will involuntarily slacked the tension in his shoulder.

“Going the same way?” inquired Hannibal, gesturing Will to join him in the seat next to his. Will gulped, trying to fight the grappling desire to stretch out in a warm place. A congenial method of escaping the wrath of the cold, a melodic siren’s call which he had to refuse.

“No, I really need to get going,” Will replied in a shaky breath, forcing himself to refuse Hannibal.

Can’t you just accept something from someone?

“Have you accepted breakfast from Miss Katz yet?”

“Already have, sorry Hannibal, I really have to go,” lied Will, straining the volume of his voice.

Hannibal silently nodded and avoided prodding for anymore, although Will felt a tension stringing the air. Hannibal most definitely knew he was lying. He muttered another goodbye before trudging away into the snow, expecting a long walk back to his spot. Feelings of guilt slightly prickled at Will as he tried to shake off the feeling, rubbing his hands together and

habitually shrinking into his jacket. Will scoffed at his own luck before feeling something cold pepper his neck.

Snow?

"A White Christmas," he whispered to himself, exhaling in awe.

The snowflakes lightly dusted the streets once more as Will suddenly remembered his list of priorities. He had to get back to the tent before the sun completely set, otherwise he would lose the way.

Will sped up his pace, shivering as he accidentally overlooked the puddles he was walking into. His shoes and socks were wet from the snow, threatening frostbitten toes. He stoically paced back to his tent, catching himself from slipping several times.

Christmas to Will meant he was able to bask in the solacing comfort of his space heater and dogs. A sudden stab of guilt clawed into Will's stomach as he thought of his dogs. They were his home.

Will snapped out of his thinking as soon as the tent came into view. He sighed a little in relief and spotted something else underneath the midnight blue tent. It wasn't anything he had seen before. It also certainly didn't belong to him—he didn't have anything left. As Will inched closer to his temporary home, he made out a small box.

A box?

Will shuffled towards the box as his fingertips hesitantly stopped at the flaps of the box. To Will's knowledge, it could be a prank, or a joke, as he had been subjected to unkind gestures, when put lightly. His curiosity soon got the better of his excuses as he slightly flinched back when opening the box.

At least it wasn't rigged.

Will hesitantly pulled back the cover of the box entirely as confusion settled in. He felt his eyebrows bunch up as a flow of questions circled his head.

There was no mistaking the deep, red wine color and the assumed texture. It was the scarf. He gingerly drew his hands to lift the scarf from the box, afraid that he might damage it. But before he completely raised the scarf from the box, his eyes drifted over an uneven indent of the scarf.

Initials?

Will scrambled to his feet, making his way onto the bare street. He thumbed the initials of the scarf as he brought it underneath a nearby light. The two letters were small, yet noticeable. A pang of realization gently settled like a feather in his stomach. They were his initials.

W.G.

Will shakily thumbed over the initials once more, afraid that they might disappear if he let it out of his touch.

This is for me.

He slowly shuffled back to the tent as he looked back inside the box. There was something he had missed. A small, white card.

Will picked up the card between his fingers, a little afraid that the box might've had a different intended receiver.

He caught a glimpse of the letters which rose and dipped with each pronounced downstroke. The bolden letters were easy to read with the natural lighting coming from the moon. He blinked away at his threatening tears before he reading out the ribbon of letters.

"I hope this finds you well. Merry Christmas, Will."

But there it was again. His name, written with care and perfection. Will felt his glassy eyes burn with tears as he shakily exhaled again. It was addressed to him.

Will tightly hugged the scarf close to his chest. Another feeling he knew all too well. The feeling of being afraid that if he held on too tight, he would slack his grip in exhaustion and lose whatever he was holding onto. He was afraid he would lose it and never find his way back to it. But this was undoubtedly his and he wouldn't give it up for anything. Will allowed the warm feeling to slightly sink into him, blanketing him from the cold.

The crystalline snow continued to fall throughout the night, with Will constricting his hands around his biceps to try and keep himself warm. If he could imagine Beverly's reactions to this, she would be chiding him for sleeping in the cold. Another short laughter of fondness escaped Will as he feel asleep to a good memory, dipping his chin into the scarf which he constricted close to his chest.

His questions, however, never left his mind. Most of them consisted of "why's" while the others blindly searched for the "who." Will shrugged off the "who" for now, knowing that he might be able to get Beverly to tell him. He snorted a little, knowing that Beverly could be coy and stubborn when she wanted to be.

The "why" lingered in his mind, leaving Will to dig through a multitude of poor reasons. It suddenly sunk into Will that the card nor the box had the sender's name.

Will gently retrieved the card back out from his pocket, checking for accidental creases before signing in relief when he found it in its original condition. He flipped over the card to the backside, finding it to be blank. He flipped over the card again, tracing his thumb over the connected strokes of his name.

It was written with a fountain pen, with its midnight black ink flowing like a stream carrying the letters to his name. However, the very same stream had not contained the letters to the sender's name.

Why would they remain anonymous?

The price of the items was certainly no joking matter, and if they weren't trying to garner his gratitude or approval, why else would there be a reason to send him anything?

Trusting his intuition usually led Will to follow the string looped around red pins on the cork board, connecting a series of dots. Will let his mind wander freely before a flash of the beige overcoat painted itself over his incessant thinking.

No. It isn't him.

Will raised his head in surprise as he blinked in hopes of regaining his clarity. He felt the crimson heat catch onto his cheeks as he tried to shake himself free of that thought.

He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Will purposefully rejected his intuition, which he had trusted up until now. His reluctance to believe himself slightly pivoted his conclusion. In fact, he wasn't sure how he even came to that conclusion, which he promptly tossed away.

As soon as Will thought of Hannibal, he groaned, gritting his teeth as he cringed.

He buried his face into the crook of his arms which were propped up against his knees as his glasses pinched the bridge of his nose.

Mission fucking accomplished.

The crystalline snow continued to fall throughout the night, with Will constricting his hands around his biceps to try and keep himself warm. He feel asleep to a good memory, dipping his chin into the scarf which he constricted close to his chest.

—

Will jerked awake as he guarded the present from last night close to his chest. Alike Fáfnir defending the treasure in his den, Will harbored a fierce obligation to protect what was rightfully his. Or at least, that's what the card said.

Will fished around in his pocket and pulled out the card again. There it was. His name, written with a form of intimacy which would not have been apparent between two strangers.

This isn't from a stranger.

This was from someone who knew him or met him before. Immediately, Will's mind involuntarily brought up the image of Hannibal, causing a frustrated groan to escape him. Will shut his eyes, trying to come up with a reasonable answer to his pondering. But he only heard the foreign accent croon his name.

"*What the hell,*" groaned Will, opening his eyes as he tried to swat away at the idea. A blush slightly varnished his cheeks as he gulped.

No, it couldn't be him. He might as well be a stranger.

Will tried to affirm himself with whatever excuse he had left, not wanting to think of Hannibal after the way he rejected his offers yesterday. Guilt prickled at Will again as he tried to shake off the feeling.

Before he could think about this any further, Will suddenly sat up. He had to go see Beverly before she posted another one of her ridiculous signs. Besides, she was due for a visit as Will changed his mind about his answer. He did want to know who it belonged to. Plus, visiting Beverly always made him happier than if he hadn't.

—

In some time (it didn't take long), Will had had reluctantly wrapped the scarf around his neck, shrinking into the warmth it provided. He trudged through the snow, before stopping in front of the cafe. He slightly exhaled out in relief and allowed a laugh to escape him, seeing no sign of the poster.

As usual, the bell on the door of the cafe lightly jingled as Beverly eagerly jumped. Her eyes glinted in a mix of relief, flashed in anger, and relished in joy as she rushed out behind the counter.

"Will!"

Will smiled at the familiarity of the voice calling out to his name before Beverly practically threw herself onto him. She ensnared him in a bear hug as Will awkwardly stood in place.

"Where were you yesterday? You were supposed to be here!" whined Beverly, constricting her arms.

Will jerkily patted Beverly's shoulders, half in an attempt to comfort and half in an apologetic manner. Physical touch isn't exactly something he was familiar with, unless it was the brutish, unwarranted kind. He didn't exactly know what to do, having barely made it through the door before Beverly started hugging him. Although he could admit, it did feel nice to be hugged.

Before he could give Beverly another excuse to avoid directly answering her question, he felt his wrist being tugged towards the counter.

"Bag of bones, you're getting 2000 calories worth of food today," affirmed Beverly as she grabbed a tray before walking back behind the counter.

"That's too-," began Will as he watched Beverly continually stack his favorite—freshly baked pain au chocolat— onto the tray.

Will's mouth began to water as he thought of the oozing chocolate which would escape as soon as he bit down onto the golden crust. His eyes widened as Beverly placed down two cups of hot chocolate made with dark chocolate. Again, his favorite. Will gulped to rid of his salivating mouth as his eyes followed Beverly's hand, reaching for biscotti after biscotti.

“Wait Beverly, I can’t eat all-,” began Will until he was cut off by Beverly’s glare.

Beverly decided to finish with macarons which Will hadn’t ever seen in this café before, let alone remember the last time he had one.

“Eat and talk.”

Will peeked out from above his glasses frames, not entirely sure if he had made Beverly mad. Beverly sighed and uncrossed her arms, leaning forward onto the counter. Will reached out both hands and gripped the cup of hot chocolate as he tasted the swirl of bitter sweet coating his throat. The warm sensation felt amazing, like he was being warmed inside out.

“I thought I should just come by and-,”

“Not yesterday you didn’t,” cut Beverly as she slightly canted her head.

Will swallowed two more gulps of his hot chocolate as he felt a twinge of guilt. He too, tried to swallow that along with his hot chocolate before reaching for the pain au chocolat. As expected, it was warm and crunchy, oozing chocolate with the slightest pressure. He moaned a little in satisfaction before delegating his answer.

“No, I-I was job hunting yesterday,” stammered Will, knowing that it could turn out to be somewhat believable.

“And how well did that go?”

“Er not so well,” shrugged Will as he slightly cringed at his words. He was hoping for Beverly to drop this topic of conversation.

“What kind of job were you looking for if they didn’t hire someone with your qualifications?”

“Not the right one I guess.”

“Not any I guess,” refuted Beverly, who seemingly knew exactly when Will would lie.

“I uh-,” began Will, running out of excuses to give. He didn’t want Beverly to know why he hadn’t shown up yesterday.

“So I see you’re actually wearing your scarf,” commented Beverly, sighing softly before bringing back her eyes trussed with mischief.

“Oh right I do want to ask you who it belonged to …” trailed off Will, hoping that Beverly would pick up with her answer.

“Too late,” shrugged Beverly, her devilish grin perking up a little.

“Hey what-,” protested Will as he tried to speak with his mouth still stuffed with the amazingly fresh and light pastry. “But you know who it’s from,” slightly pleaded Will.

“And you still don’t? Gave you two chances and you failed at both of them?” inquired Beverly, in a dejected and somewhat sarcastic tone.

“Something like that,” groaned Will, rolling his eyes as he shot back at Beverly. It had been a while since he was able to poke fun at someone without needing to be overly cognizant about their feelings.

“Oh well I’m not surprised,” replied Beverly, with a slight hum to her voice. She flashed a roguish smile as she propped her chin up on her elbow. Hannibal had a knack for hiding his intentions and Beverly had to admit he was a rather hard person to read.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” questioned Will, genuine curiosity peeking out from his voice. He raised an eyebrow as he scarfed down the biscotti. It was baked to crunch and lined with dark chocolate along the bottom.

“Nothing,” remarked Beverly, in a sing-songy tone, which slightly irritated Will. She was clearly leaving him in the dark about all sorts of potential things and which only encouraged him to poke further at this.

“It’ll help me sleep better,” pleaded Will, giving Beverly a flash of his ceruleans as he looked up from his glasses. Feigning an obvious innocence, Will foiled his look when his lips tugged into a smile.

“Might work on whoever gave you that scarf but not on me,” bumptiously shrugged Beverly, her smug smile never fading, to Will’s slight annoyance.

“A vague hint maybe?” attempted Will, trying for a negotiation.

The corner of Beverly’s lip slightly tugged up into a sly grin as she over exaggerated at her pondering. Will exhaled a short laugh at it before Beverly finally gave an answer.

“The ‘anonymous’ has been coming here more often. Wonder why,” hummed Beverly, offering the hint in a rather suggestive manner.

“Don’t air quote anonymous like you don’t already know who he is,” quipped Will as he rolled his eyes and snorted a laugh.

“He? Have someone in mind, Will?” teased Beverly, mockingly twirling her pointer finger in the locks of her hair.

“N-no,” defensively stammered Will, who was definitely lying. He didn’t exactly do a great job of hiding it either.

“Totally,” trailed off Beverly as she left Will to assuage the incoming stream of customers.

At this point, Will had finished most of the food on his wooden tray, not realizing how hungry he had been. His fingers reached to the pink macaron as he delicately held it in between his fingers. At last, Will bit into the crunchy shell and sunk into the soft interior. It wasn’t too sweet and tasted of rose.

Will's eyes lit up immediately at the texture and the taste of roses before taking the macaron down in small bites, trying to savor it. Beverly skipped back to the end of the counter which Will sat as her attention floated towards the jingling bell.

Will was quite frankly too focused on what flavor this gray and peppered macaron was to notice the way Beverly perked up. Will gave up on deducing his food as he took a bite, pleasantly surprised to taste a tea flavor.

Earl Grey.

Before Will could finish the last bite of his macaron, an earthy voice crooned behind Will. The ever so familiar sotto voce voice.

"Will, I hope you find your breakfast satisfactory. My very recipe."

Will nearly choked on his food as he tried to formulate a response without making a fool of himself, which he had been doing remarkably well lately. He twisted his body to face the voice behind him, inhibited by a tall, stunning foreigner. A blush blossomed on his pale cheeks as Beverly impatiently tapped the counter, waiting for action.

"It's good," offered Will, slightly nodding along to his words and habitually pulling the scarf taut on his neck.

"Boss, you're visiting an awful lot more. Miss me that much?" quipped Beverly.

"Not nearly as much as can be, Miss Katz," smoothly replied Hannibal, causing a smile to quirk up on Will's lips.

Will brought the second cup of hot chocolate to his lips as he tilted the cup, taking another sip. He observed Hannibal out of the corner of his eyes. His hair was unset and had a rather domestic aura to him. Will liked this look on Hannibal, he decided as his eyes slowly drifted over the rest of Hannibal.

"Checking someone out?" teased Beverly, causing Will to jump in his seat.

"No," hastily insisted Will, trying to find a way to change the subject.

"S-so why do you call Hannibal boss? It doesn't really seem like he works here," asked Will, forwarding the question to mostly Hannibal.

"I believe Miss Katz can answer that, for I have yet to understand," replied Hannibal, looking expectantly over to Beverly.

"Most of these recipes are courtesy of Hannibal. Doesn't really look like a guy that bakes but his macarons are totally amazing," offered Beverly as she shrugged.

"Baking is an artistic ability to reflect your vision onto a canvas. Simply put, creative expression, Miss Katz."

“What are you trying to say?” asked Beverly, who was perhaps finally catching on to Hannibal’s tone.

“You, Miss Katz, do not possess that ability,” sighed Hannibal, leaving the Will next to him stifling a laugh.

The exchange between Hannibal and Beverly was something refreshing, although Hannibal did look somewhat peeved and displeased. It wasn’t a tug and war which went back and forth. Hannibal had won even before the conversation began.

Will fiddled with his thumbs on top of the hot chocolate as he was usually tuned out of most conversations. It was something he had gotten used to. Taking a sip from his now warm drink, Hannibal had slightly turned to look at Will. Will darted his eyes away, nearly choking on his drink.

“Not fond of eye contact, are you, Will?”

“Eyes are distracting. You see too much, sometimes you don’t see enough,” replied Will as he refocused his gaze onto Hannibal.

This time, he made eye contact with Hannibal, meeting with his hazel eyes. A sudden uneasiness filled Will which knotted in his stomach. An intuitive feeling which usually nudged at Will in the right direction now harbored a lung burning scream to the opposite direction.

He’s dangerous.

Will frustratingly buried that thought, hoping it wouldn’t linger. He knew that his intuition was just being misleading, although a sliver of hope nestled in his mind. He hoped it was wrong.

“And what might you see in the reflection of mine?”

“I would answer b-but it’s hard to focus when you’re thinking, um,” rushed Will, trying to think of anything other than the first thought that came to his mind. He groaned in embarrassment before being able to contain his flow of thoughts.

At least Hannibal was somewhat amused, as he softly exhaled a laugh. Will rubbed the nape of his neck in an attempt to calm his blush which was brought upon by his own ignominy.

“Will, don’t wanna be tearing that scarf off already,” yelled Beverly, at the other end of the counter.

Will blinked back into reality before realizing that he had been nervously tugging on his scarf. Hannibal took notice as he looked at the scarf around Will, with a surprising amount of fondness rather than the usual skepticism people looked at him with. However, Will wasn’t one to take chances.

“I-I swear it looks like I probably stole this but I didn’t,” stammered Will, jolting to finish his sentence.

“I will accuse you of nothing of the sort. Judgements made upon appearance are bound to collapse under the slightest of pressure.”

A sudden feeling of relief melted into Will’s chest as he slacked his shoulders a little, unaware of how tense he had been sitting.

“Hard to come by someone who doesn’t immediately assume things about me,” shrugged Will.

“Therefore I am not ‘someone’ by your means?” asked Hannibal.

“No,” spoke Will in a low tone, tipping back the cup to catch the last bit of his hot chocolate. The chocolate was evenly blended throughout the drink, not leaving any disproportion of bitterness and sweetness. It was delicious.

It wasn’t his place to stay after finishing his breakfast anyways. Or rather, the composite of his three meals today. His eyes darted to the door, apprehensively standing up to leave the cafe.

“See you around Bev,” waved Will, as he turned to walk out of the café.

“Wai- Will!” urgently rushed Beverly, finishing up the last customer on the line with a surprising amount of precision and speed. She could really get things done when she wanted to.

Will twisted his body as he watched Beverly pull out a bag from underneath the counter. He exhaled, looking at the way the bow was plastered onto the bag attached with a sticky note.

Why?

“Beverly, I really can’t take it,” refused Will as he pushed the door to walk outside.

Beverly came out behind the counter, still holding the paper bag in her hand.

“I got it for you, Will. Least you could do is take care of yourself for me, you know?” requested Beverly, in a clear cut, genuine tone. She hadn’t said it with any voice to pressure Will into taking it either.

“I- I really appreciate it Bev, but you know…” trailed off Will, unsure of why he felt so uncomfortable receiving a gift from Beverly.

“Mind enlightening me on what I should know?” lightly asked Beverly, sighing a little in disappointment.

“It’s just hard for me- I didn’t get you anything,” softly spoke Will as he bowed his head, shuffling his feet on the floor.

“I didn’t suddenly forget you were homeless, Will. I don’t *want* anything from you except for you to come by more often because then it would mean Hannibal would follow in like a dog,” retorted Beverly in good humor as she lightly reached out the bag again.

Will reluctantly wrapped his finger around the handles of the paper bag before an unfamiliar feeling of warmth and something light ran through his body. It was hard to describe but it weighed heavily in his mind yet floated lightly in his chest and stomach.

“T-thanks Bev, I really appreciate it,” nodded Will before offering a promised commitment, which he rarely put forward.

“I’ll visit more often,” added Will, before waving off to Beverly. Before he walked out the door, he offered a wave to Hannibal, which he in turn received another of his subtle smiles. The ones that made Will feel kind of soft inside.

—

“That was rude Miss Katz,” spoke Hannibal without his usual meaning nor emphasis.

“You said I was inept at baking,” grumbled Beverly, having taken offense at that.

“And may God forbid one day that you do take it up again,” continued Hannibal, accompanied with his usual pretentious smirk, which Beverly rolled her eyes at.

“At least I could give Will a present without being school-girl shy about it,” retorted Beverly, her words lacking the usual sarcasm.

“Only for it to be refused?”

“Can’t take a rejection?”

“I have had the luxury of rarely being turned down, Miss Katz. I believe that you are quite the experienced in handling rejections?” calmly replied Hannibal, almost elegantly insulting Beverly.

“When are you going to tell Will? You know he’s not going to stay for long,” softly acknowledged Beverly, knowing that her encounter with Will had been by a pure coincidental fluke.

“I believe Will is sagacious enough to find the answer, if he so chooses to ask himself. Disappointment tarnishes the image of faith, yet I do not have expectations for such a feeling in Will.”

Beverly let out a short hummed in consideration as she canted her head, sighing as she couldn’t convince Hannibal, who was just as stubborn as Will.

“Just admit you’re scared,” lightly teased Beverly as she walked away into the back kitchen.

—

I should really look for a job.

Will continued his intuitive checklist as he softly hummed whilst walking back to his tent. The midnight blue color matched the sky as stars unevenly peppered it. The intensity of the

dark blue was assuaged and barely drowned out by the jet black sky.

A light feeling brought on waves of small smiles onto Will's face as he eagerly walked through the snow, wanting to see what Beverly had got him.

As Will turned the sharp round, he made out a black spot in the snow. There was very clearly something there, as the white snow contrasted against whatever the black object was.

Will took off his glasses, cleaning them with the sleeve of his jacket before placing them back into his face. His grip tightened on the bag as he gingerly stepped towards the spot.

A cat?

Twisting Into an Ugly Ring

Chapter Notes

This fic's rating will change to Explicit in about 2 chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A cat?

Will slowly approached the spot on the snow with his hand out. It seemed to be well groomed, although it projected the signs of a stray. He gingerly inched closer to the cat before its head perked up, ears flitting as its stance changed. It went from a domestic stance to a threatened one.

"Hey, hey," whispered Will, slowly crouching down to pet the animal in front of him.

A look of curiosity was reflected in the cat's eyes, which was vaguely reminiscent of someone Will knew. The cat obliged, softening its tense stance as it sat back down onto the snow. Will felt himself laugh as he drew his hands to gently pet the area between the ears.

A sudden stabbing pain settled in his heart, remembering his dogs. Will slightly exhaled a sigh through his nose, letting his eyelids slightly relax before catching the glimpse of a gray collar.

It has a collar? Not a stray then.

Will canted his head to read the letters which were sewed onto the leather collar.

Verutis.

It was certainly a unique name, if he had ever seen one belonging to a cat, or anyone for that matter. It was most likely in another language, although it wasn't reminiscent of any he had ever learned.

Will's eyes drawled over the collar as he lazily rubbed the spot back and forth, switching to a scratch before snapping out of his intuitive daydreams. The sensation of a warm and soft animal was a familiar feeling which he had not experienced in a long time.

Will refocused on the collar, observing rather than reading the name, before his ceruleans momentarily widened. He frantically reached for the end of his scarf, hastily bringing it forward to thumb the ridges of his initials. He brought it up close, examining the letters he had seemingly looked at for the hundredth time.

His other hand's thumb brushed over the letters on the collar, canting his head to catch the style of the letters. It rose and dipped the same way his initials did, with the spacing between the ridges matching in distance and size. It hadn't felt rough to the touch either meaning each hole was pierced with an extremely sharp needle. With an almost surgical precision.

The stitching on the collar and my scarf match.

Will's heart pounded faster as he came to the only logical conclusion. It meant that whoever made the collar by hand also stitched and gifted Will the scarf. The times he hadn't been by this tent were the very moments the unexpected giver came by.

As soon as Will drew his hand back, the cat fled past him, not in fear, but in anticipation for something grander. Its deliberate yet light steps signaled another matter to which the predator had to tend to. A hunt.

The sky approached sunset as streaks of a vehement orange and pastel purple varnished across the sky. Will shifted his weight onto his knees to stand up before remembering the paper bag.

A flit of excitement reignited in Will, warm feelings pooling in his stomach before reaching for the bag. He grabbed the bag by its handles, expectantly shuffling towards the tent before settling down. Will reached down into the bag, feeling something soft to the touch. As Will pulled it out, he fondly exhaled a small laugh thumbing over the sticky note pasted on his gift.

Don't die or I'll dig you out of your grave to kill you myself - xoxo Bev

Underneath the sticky note was a knit cuffed beanie, lined with fur on the inside. It was extremely soft to the touch and felt expensive. Will let out an apathetic sigh, detesting the feeling of being indebted, although he knew Beverly would never expect anything in return.

The knit cuffed beanie was a shade of forest green. It was the color of the leaves that were merely steps away from crossing from Spring to Autumn. It was reminiscent of his woodland treks which he would take with his dogs. Soft on the eyes and undoubtedly on the head. The color was truly stunning, with Will reluctantly stretching it over his head, sighing in relief as his reddened ears were finally granted warmth.

The fur lining tickled his ears as his curls stuck out of the hat, maintaining its volume. Will rubbed the strands of hair in between his fingers, knowing that his hair had been getting somewhat lengthy.

The heart pounding realization stayed in Will's mind as it was practically burned into the back of his mind. He knew his first destination tomorrow would be Beverly's cafe, his fingertips finally brushing up against a breakthrough.

Feeling warmer than he has been in a long time, Will slowly dipped his head onto his knees, falling asleep under the midnight blue home he now knew to have been sharing with Verutis.

—

With the sun rays slowly peeking into the alley, flooding the streets, Will slowly blinked awake, reaching around his neck and head. His scarf and hat were still there. Will exhaled in deep relief before instinctively brushing away the curls that rested on his glasses, only for them to stay put due to the hat.

He was expecting to wake up shivering again, having to pull the thin hood of his jacket over his head. However, the beanie and scarf have both seemed to retain his body heat well enough for him to feel warm. Will even felt comfortable, before remembering his agenda.

The answer may be within reach. Will just had to make sure he reached out quick enough before it slipped through the crevices of his fingers again. He was quite the experienced one in the familiarity of disappointment, attracting misfortune like a magnet of all bad things.

Will figured that it would be the best to do something about it before he dithered in regret over something he was so close to. He expectantly stood up before a sharp pain dug into his rib, which still throbbed like a fresh wound. Will pushed himself up from against the wall, finding his footing before tugging down his hat and fixing his scarf.

The café wasn't a long walk, luckily for Will, who had memorized the directions from and back to his tent. He picked up his pace, looking expectantly for an answer from Beverly. His intuition nudges were most likely dulled from being deserted and needed sharpening. The thought of sharpening them brought upon shivers of rage mixed with fear, melding into an ugly color.

Will stuck his hands into his coat pocket, tracing his finger around the edge of the card. The same card from the gifter. Will made a turn and apprehensively pulled open the door to the café, already expecting to meet Beverly's beaming smile and teasing look. However this time, he would call out to Beverly first.

"Bev," called out Will, with a softer voice in comparison to Beverly's usual energy. He sheepishly ducked underneath the protection of his scarf as it still drew the attention of others nearby.

As soon as Beverly heard her name, she whipped her head to follow the source, switching to a fond smile. Her grin widened to a feline one as her eyes trailed to Will's head, inhabiting her present.

It seemed that whenever Will had entered the café, the seat by Beverly was always vacant. Not giving it any further thought, Will pulled out the chair, immediately diving into his point.

"I think I might have an idea who gave me the scarf," hastily exhaled Will as he unzipped his jacket.

Beverly slightly let out a small laugh at Will, before he raised an eyebrow and a question.

"What?"

“It’s just you’re still all bundled up. Scarf and beanie,” fondly commented Beverly, which hadn’t been made in any sarcastic or teasing tone.

Will felt his cheeks burn, a little embarrassed. Beverly was right, he never felt the need to take off his scarf and now, his hat. Although it was more rather he didn’t want to.

“But keep them on. The red and green compliments your baby blues,” settled Beverly, grabbing a tray for Will’s breakfast.

“You really don’t have to continue feeding me Beverly, I do just fine,” insisted Will, getting ready to inject his counterargument to whatever Beverly usually said. However, it never came. An awkward and tense silence hung in the air between Will and Beverly as no answer was returned.

“Beverly?”

Will was now sure that Beverly was ignoring him, feeling his anxiety rise a little. Beverly usually quipped back in response, humoring Will in a much needed manner. This time there was no response from Beverly, and if this was her way of making Will stop his protesting, it worked.

Beverly firmly stacked his favorite onto the tray, before adding something he had never seen in this café before.

“Is that a cinnamon bun?” asked Will, his genuine curiosity peeking out of his voice. Will’s mouth watered thinking about having a taste of the simplistic and rustic charm of a regular cinnamon bun again.

“Yup, don’t tell Hannibal though,” finally replied Beverly, to Will’s immediate relief.

Beverly passed the tray over to Will as she placed down two cups in front of Will, one labeled with “Hot chocolate” and one labeled with “Coffee.” Will reached out for something small first, wanting to continue his train of thought before Beverly spoke.

“So you really know who gave you that scarf?” asked Beverly, her voice strewn with a little surprise rather than coyness.

“No, but I have a lead,” replied Will, missing Beverly’s usual tone of voice.

“Seriously? Do elaborate,” nodded Beverly, as Will ate away at the milk chocolate biscuit.

“Is it supposed to be surprising?” inquired Will, wondering why Beverly’s tone implied surprise rather than merriment.

“I guess not?”

“Just hear me out,” began Will, as he took down a few sips of his coffee. It was delicious.

“I found a stray cat with a collar which had the exact same type of stitching used for the initials of my scarf,” spoke Will, before he slightly scoffed at the off chance that this

coincidence was all by chance. By now, Beverly looked even more curious than before, albeit a little confused.

“A cat?” questioned Beverly, eagerly digging for more. Hannibal never seemed like the type to own a cat, much less care for a stray.

“ *Verutis* ring any bells?” asked Will, trying to shovel his way to whoever may own the cat.

“That’s the name of the cat?” asked Beverly, genuinely lost in the tracks of his conversation.

Will let out a low chuckle before nodding in both agreement and yes as the answer.

“Nope, sorry Will, *Verutis* doesn’t ring any bells,” replied Beverly. She was unsure if Will was any closer to finding the answer, without Hannibal being here to confirm.

“W-where is Hannibal anyways?” asked Will, immediately reaching to drink his coffee in some attempt to hide his face. A pink undoubtedly blossomed on his cheeks as Beverly let out a small “Oh?”.

“He’s probably busy with somebody else right now,” replied Beverly, somewhat nonchalantly.

Will felt a weight drop from his heart into his stomach as he slightly dropped his head in disappointment. Although it made sense.

“O-oh right,” murmured Will, not knowing what he was expecting.

“Yup, he’s probably busy with a patient right about now,” smirked Beverly, looking down at her wrist which housed no watch in the first place.

“Bet I gotcha though,” playfully quipped Beverly, as Will’s face undeniably grew to a crimson red.

“I-I wasn’t-,” sighed Will, knowing that he could not refute his own honest feelings.

“He’s a psychiatrist,” clarified Beverly, still laughing at the way Will grumbled in annoyance and embarrassment.

“I haven’t veered off my schedule too much. He’s usually here around this time, isn’t he?” questioned Will.

“His schedule is pretty flexible I guess,” shrugged Beverly.

Will hummed in consideration as he nervously drummed his finger on his thighs. He usually saw Hannibal at the café, taking in the scent of his light cologne and the sight of his lazily parted hair. Their conversations have been getting longer with each visit, which admittedly haven’t been many so far. Will huffed away at a curl before finishing his coffee to the news anchor.

“The Chesapeake Ripper has killed the third victim of a sounder ..” trailed off the TV channel before Will’s eyes widened. He choked on his drink, never taking his eyes off the screen.

He recognized the victim. Will’s tongue felt weighed down, unable to speak nor remember her name. It was an arduous task to swallow his dry mouth as he could only remember Hannibal’s husky yet enchanting voice.

“Miss Grethe.”

“Will,” whispered Beverly, pointing to the door.

Will’s mind flickered back and forth to the events of his encounter as his heartbeat drummed in his chest. He had seen her, even physically bumped into her, only to see her again as a victim.

“A terrible fate that Miss Grethe has met, it seems,” began a voice behind Will.

Will redirected his attention from the TV to the voice behind him, knowing exactly whom it belonged to.

“Hannibal,” whispered Will, before nodding his head in agreement. Will had seen his fair share of crime scenes and brutality, though this was harder to grasp. He had never felt a familiarity with the bodies he would examine, even though this wasn’t what he would coin “familiarity.”

“Geez, this News Channel is hardcore,” cringed Beverly, looking at the crime scene photos flashing up on the screen.

“Miss Lounds is rather known for her extremities,” commented Hannibal, as he pulled out the seat next to Will.

“Her tongue was taken as a trophy,” noted Will, as his eyes flitted over the screen once again.

“Miss Grethe was known to be a particularly chatty one.”

“The way she died– i-it’s almost pedestrian compared to the way she was dressed up post mortem-,” stammered Will, stringing and wrapping the red string upon his intuitive tackboard

“Damn, overdosing in a pair of Versace’s,” agreed Beverly, taking up interest in the TV as Will did.

“Build the strongest structure on an unassuming crumbling base and you may find it to collapse. Appearances tell you naught,” added Hannibal, looking on the screen with a matched interest.

“The Chesapeake Ripper’s message? Make assumptions and you pay the price for it?” scoffed Will, recognizing the irony in the message.

“Yet logical conclusions do not come to fruition without assumptions. Paradoxical in nature.”

“Keyword being logical,” pointed out Will. “Guess she wasn’t one to make logical conclusions then?”

“I’m afraid not,” exhaled Hannibal.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, fell victim to it,” lightly shrugged Will, looking to change the subject.

“Hold on have you guys been meeting outside of here?” inquired Beverly, with an usual apprehensive tone.

“N-no,” sharply suggested Will, not wanting the encounter he shared with Hannibal to count as a “meeting.”

“Yeah, sure,” retorted Beverly as she rolled her eyes, moving to placate the line of customers.

Will looked at the empty wooden tray in front of him as he nervously changed his line of sight over to Hannibal.

“Hannibal, do you uh- are you fond of animals?” started Will, remembering what he came to the café for.

Hannibal drifted his attention over to Will, lips drawing up into a smile which made Will feel a little more comfortable in his seat. “Not particularly, though I’m not impartial to them,” replied Hannibal.

“Oh I see, never mind what I said then,” nodded Will, thinking about some other way which he might find the lead of his red string.

“For what reason do you inquire?”

“It’s a long story really, and honestly, it’s a bit unbelievable. But also, I ought to get going,” replied Will, with an actual agenda to attend to.

“It seems that our meetings always end at the 10 minute mark.”

“Is that an invitation?” jokingly quipped Will, as he zipped up his jacket.

“If you make it out to be it is,” interjected Beverly, periodically peeping into the conversation.

Will exhaled a small laugh before unraveling his scarf to reposition it on his neck. He canted his head forward to unravel his scarf, stripping it free from his neck. Will moved to rewrap it around his neck in haste before Hannibal spoke.

“May I?”

“Oh, yeah s-sure,” quietly murmured Will, shuffling towards Hannibal.

With a gentle touch, Hannibal settled the scarf around his neck before briefly stretching out its coverage. It ensured a snug fit, yet all the while, free from any hint of constriction. Will shivered as he felt Hannibal's fingertips lightly trace his neck, hearing his own heart drum loudly. His face grew hot, as he bit down on his lip as a means to try to calm himself. If Hannibal made a knot or tied it in some special way, Will didn't notice. Hannibal slightly unzipped Will's jacket to tuck the ends in, flipping over the side with his initials on top.

"Th-thanks Hannibal," stammered Will with his words catching in his own throat.

"It was my pleasure," replied Hannibal, admiring his handiwork. He was looking at the flustered Will whose eyes darted apprehensively to the door.

Will briskly walked out the café, his heart never calming down. His cheeks were suffused with a light pink, a lingering testament to the blush which had varnished his face and ears earlier. The ember heat from his cheeks swelled as Will buried his face into the scarf which Hannibal had wrapped around him.

—

Will decided to take the extra long route back to the tent, stopping in front of stores for signs. Help wanted signs. He left the café early to search for a job, which he knew he would have some trouble finding.

For the first time in a while, Will was pleasantly surprised to find that he was wrong. He stopped in front of a convenience store, plastered with a myriad of help wanted signs. It was still light enough to make out most of the words, ignoring posters which were weathered away.

Will's eyes scanned over most of them before landing on one. It was a modest job at a fisherman depot. It was a lucky hit. Will tore the paper off the glass pane, ignoring the little uniform strips with the company's number on the bottom. He didn't have a phone.

Will clutched the paper in his hands as he shoved it into his pocket, not knowing where the location of the depot was. He would bring it to Beverly tomorrow, hoping that the location would be convenient.

At least the street name sounded somewhat familiar.

But for tonight, he decided to trek back to the tent, all the while nudging his chin into the scarf which Hannibal had knotted. However Hannibal knotted the scarf, it was effective at holding its shape. Will didn't need to bother with rewrapping it and felt a kind of comfort in knowing that a little part of Hannibal stayed with him.

Will took a few turns before coming into the vicinity of the area which he knew to be familiar. The illuminating street lamps guided him back to the alleyway where the tent was. Where his home was, albeit temporary.

Even with the unrelenting wind, Will felt a kind of warmth he couldn't describe. It was a rich yet light feeling, thick with satisfaction of the way everything slowly fell into place. For

once, Will smiled to himself, seeing the peeking light from within the tunnel. If he could shovel the dirt, he would have the strength to pull himself out. He didn't need to rely on anyone; he had been independent his whole life and planned to keep it that way.

Will exhaled as he saw the familiar color of the brick building come into view. He turned sharply once more into the alleyway. Before Will walked to the tent, he stopped in his tracks and crouched in the snow.

Footprints?

There were two sets of footprints. One undoubtedly belonged to the paws of a cat. *Verutis.* The other set of footprints belonged to a pair of dress shoes, with the front pointed and the heel imprinted onto the snow.

Someone was here.

A shuttered breath escaped Will as he tried to exhale a curse, failing to expel his caged frustration. The weight of disappointment burdened his shoulders as they slacked. His heart dipped into his stomach, feeling beyond derided.

If only he were a minute—no, seconds earlier, he would have seen who it was. A guttural groan of frustration escaped Will as he plopped down underneath the tent. Another try, perhaps it would take, but the thinning string of patience in Will was fraying.

Another try.

Will shimmied his face into his scarf, still slightly trembling from the cold. If he was lucky, he wouldn't freeze half to death tonight. Will slightly adjusted his hat to envelop his ears before wrapping his arms around his bunched up knees. The thought of getting a job slightly rekindled a warmth in him, igniting a small flare in his chest.

—

The sun rose at an angle which allowed Will to bask in the warmth, even if underneath a tent. He slowly blinked awake and winced at the blinding rays of sunshine before adjusting to it. Instinctively, Will reached up to his neck and head, feeling for his scarf and hat simultaneously. They were still there.

Will exhaled a breath, suddenly hitting a wall of drowsiness which caused him to want to subside and bask lazily in the sunlight. However, he had something important which he had to attend to.

Before long, Will's daytime pondering had overridden his desire to stamp his foot in the present, jumping over thoughts and dawdling over others. His footsteps matched in pace of his stream of thoughts before Will blinked back into reality. He was already here.

As usual, Will peered inside the glass door of the café, surveying the crowd of people. Usually, the earlier he came, the less people there would be. Today seemed to be the case of "less people"as Will strayed from his routine ever so often. Plus, without a watch, it was hard

to tell the time. He pulled on the handle of the door before gravitating towards the dark, forest roast scent of coffee.

“Will!” called out Beverly.

Will waved as he shuffled towards his usual seat, nearest to Beverly. He nervously fiddled with the job flyer which was folded in his pocket before gawking at the tower of treats Beverly put down before him.

“I-,” stammered Will.

Beverly bursted into a fit of laughter as she picked a brownie off Will’s tray for herself, playfully nudging him to start his breakfast.

“You look terribly emaciated, Will,” cooed Beverly, oozing in sarcasm and fake pity.

Will grumbled in annoyance as he picked up the oatmeal raisin cookie, which was one of his favorite delectables.

“So I’m assuming you’re here for something aren’t you,” sighed Beverly, with a little disdain.

“Always,” retorted Will, before he reached into his right pocket. His left pocket housed only one item, which was the card he had received for Christmas with the scarf.

“Mhm talk,” hummed Beverly, in between bites of her brownie.

“I found an actual job this time,” began Will, before he was interrupted by Beverly.

“And you didn’t tell me? Could’ve given me an excuse to fire one of those incompetencies in the kitchen,” grumbled Beverly, half in truth.

Will pulled out the wrinkled flyer before unfolding it onto the counter. Beverly traced her pinky over the words as she hummed in consideration while reading the flyer.

“Fisherman depot… Fisherman depot?”

“Y-yeah, I guess I never told you,” replied Will, to Beverly’s surprise.

“So then tell me now. I was sure you were going to look for a job at an auto repair shop or something ,” answered Beverly, with a sheen of curiosity hazing over her brown eyes.

“There’s nothing much to say other than I fish for fun,” shrugged Will, taking down gulps of his hot chocolate. It burned the roof of his mouth and back of his throat but it felt like a surmount of firecrackers, blazing with warmth.

“It was like God dropped you off in front of this café when I needed your help,” reminisced Beverly, undoubtedly reeling back the memory of when she first met Will.

“It was pretty unbelievable,” agreed Will, answering in mutters.

“I think my actual boss would’ve killed me if you hadn’t helped me fix that old, haggled machine.”

“Not everyday you get to see the homeless fix an espresso machine ” shrugged Will, remembering that it wasn’t exactly an easy fix. However, his experience and knowledge in fixing boat motors proved to be of great help.

“Anyways Bev, I need you to help me with directions,” began Will, pointing at the address written on the flyer.

Beverly shook her head before scrunching up her brows at the address. Her eyebrows never untangled as she looked up at Will, making eye contact with his foggy blue eyes, hidden behind the scratchy lenses of his glasses.

“Hylane Street? Will, that part of town is seriously dangerous. There’s a reason it’s nicknamed “High Lane” Street. You don’t want to go there,” sighed Beverly, feeling a knot of dread in her stomach. Will was a stubborn boulder which sometimes refused to move no matter the conditions. Almost similar to that of roots penetrating into the ground, which bounded the stubborn Will into place.

Will gave no answer in reply to Beverly’s concern as he continued, to Beverly’s disappointment, yet not entirely surprised.

“Just need directions.”

“If I refuse?”

“Then I’ll find it myself,” firmly stated Will, with a boldness surging through him. His impatience bubbled unpredictably, concocting mixture which could only be described as distasteful colors.

Beverly hesitantly reached for the pad in her apron as she plucked the pen that was holding her hair bun together. Will blinked in surprise as he slowly took down a cheese danish, washing it down with the thick and bitter trace of coffee. As Beverly finished, she tore off the piece of paper, reluctantly sliding it towards Will.

“Thanks, Bev, I really appreciate it,” exhaled Will in relief, as he knew he wouldn’t have anyone else to ask.

“Don’t die out there,” finalized Beverly, knowing that any attempt of dissuading Will’s decision would only fly over his head.

“I promise I won’t,” answered Will, giving up a faint, though genuine smile.

“I should really find someone to fire,” grumbled Beverly as she crossed over to where the snake of customers awaited her.

Will looked at the clock up on the wall before squinting to read the time.

12:46

It was already past afternoon proving how hard it was to gauge the time without a watch or a phone. With the season being Winter, it would be harder to tell the time by looking at the sky, the early sun dipping into the horizon leaving behind an incendiary trail of an orangey haze.

Will hurriedly stuffed down another oatmeal raisin cookie before finishing the cup of coffee, returning his tray to the end of the counter.

He looked around for traces of Beverly before drumming his fingers in anticipation. He wanted to get the job as soon as possible. Will at last plucked a napkin before borrowing the pen which Beverly used earlier to scribble down a note.

Gotta run. - Will

He traced the edge of the paper in his pocket as he hurried off in the cadence of Beverly's roadmap. To Will's surprise, her handwriting was fastidious and consistent, written in small blocks of uniformed letters. Moreover, her instructions were extremely concise and understandable, with sign and street matching up.

Without needing to read the directions Beverly wrote up for him, Will immediately knew when he had reached "Hylane Street." His intuition pushed him to turn and run. It was an urge Will had to swallow, although it felt like a pill too big to do so, lodging in his throat. The hairs on his neck stood taut as the embodiment of a "bad feeling" sinuously inched up his spine.

However, Will ignored the feeling, choosing to pace toward the uneven road to his independence. He pulled up the scarf to hide his face before pulling down his hat for the very same reason. The crumpled note was retrieved from Will's pocket before he followed down the list, picking up from where he was. Will started to trudge through the thick blankets of snow, ignoring the stinging whiplashes of the wind.

"Hey, what's someone like you doing here?" came an unceremonious, gruffly voice and bouts of whistling.

Will quickened his pace, anxiety slowly vining intravenously through his body.

"I'm talking to ya," spat the same venomous tone as a group of people gathered beside Will.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, why?

"Leave me alone, I didn't do shit," snarled Will.

"Oooh shit, he's got a dirty mouth," jeered the person behind Will, bringing on bouts of snickering and wallops.

"Listen, your hat looks like ya got enough to spare so lend us some," spoke the person, approaching Will.

Will defensively backed away, feelings of covet and possession intensely tugging at him. He maintained a scowl on his face, backing away until he hit another person.

“Come on, that or the scarf,” he sneered.

Will immediately felt the stinging cold of the air as it hit his ears, not having been familiar with the feeling since receiving the present from Beverly. It was being dangled from above him, with the intention of mocking him.

“Give it back,” gritted Will, his words coming out in a scratchy and low tone, accompanied by a trickling ire.

“No can do,” shrugged the older assumed leader as the hat was tossed to him.

“It’s mine,” sharply exhaled Will, his anger bubbling uncontrollably.

“Not anymore.”

Will felt a sudden blow to his ribs as he clutched them in pain, gasping in a pathetic attempt to catch the breath that was beaten out of him. He stifled a pained grimace as he tried to prop himself back up, only to fall back down, wheezing in an agonizing pain. Physical pain only hurt so much as it was incomparable to the brash tugging of his scarf. He was going to lose that too.

No.

A roar of jeers came from the crowd around Will as he could only curl up against himself on the snow, feeling bare. His heart sank into his stomach, like lead which reached the abyssal zone of oceans. A searing trail of his tears leaked out of his eyes, familiar to the feeling of losing something which he cherished so.

The last thought which lingered on Will’s mind was more than the materialistic notion of his possessions; it was the only reminder that someone still cared for him.

—

Will woke up to a soft sensation beneath him as he started to blink awake.

Where the fuck am I?

Will twisted his body, trying to adjust to the already dim lighting around him as he sat up, wheezing in pain. He looked down at the duvet cover which he was covered in, before tossing the cover aside, with a great deal of straining.

Will plastered his hand onto his ribs, tracing the lined feeling of gauze underneath the shirt he wore.

As he tried to swing his body over the edge of the bed, he slipped entirely out of the bed, coughing up a painful groan. Will’s eyes burned with tears again, as a crashing wave of memories came back to him.

My scarf and my hat.

Will choked on a sob before trying to hoist himself back up, his unruly curls and bandages being reflected in the mirror. His clothes weren't his own. He continued to arduously grope the wall near him, feeling for the knob to escape wherever he was. But before he had an opportunity to, a voice spoke.

"Will."

It was a familiar tone, an exotic yet enthralling accent, as if Will had been hearing it for the entirety of his life. It was low and steady, reverberating at a serene chord.

Hannibal.

Chapter End Notes

(Verutis might have a direct translation in Lithuanian but that is not its intended meaning)

Just our Hannigram next chapter

Bunched into a Knot

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is dedicated to teyaono, who will probably not know that this is dedicated to them because they don't read author notes.
>
> But in case you did, this is for you. Thanks for hearing me out, always.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hannibal?" snarled Will, defensively backing into the bedroom once more.

"Will, it is important that you get bed rest," ushered Hannibal, who was still in his black apron. His cuffs were neatly rolled up and hair unevenly parted, with the top buttons of his shirt, which were usually buttoned, being left opened.

"I need to leave," warned Will, his voice warbling in a quiver.

"Will, you were injured to the extent of nearly death. Please rest," spoke Hannibal, canting his head forward to take off his apron.

"Maybe they should've done just that," spat Will, bitterly directing his contempt towards Hannibal. His piercing blues were no longer hidden behind the wade of his curls and foggy glasses, honing a penetrating glare.

"Fate has a habit of not letting us choose our own endings."

"I wouldn't call your intrusion fate," snarled Will, his tone thick with rancor, hating the way his shield chipped away before Hannibal. He felt vulnerable.

Will gingerly, yet with a great amount of force, pushed past Hannibal, walking out of the bedroom. His own weight felt like an anchor, too heavy to hold up. He clutched onto his abdomen before his knees buckled, sending Will gasping for air on the floor.

Without a creak of a floorboard or the squeak of a door hinge, Hannibal appeared by Will's side, crouching. Will felt the feathery feeling of fingertips gliding over his shoulder, but he only jerked away from it.

"I don't need your help," hissed Will, pulling away his shoulder.

"And whose help might you accept? Miss Katz?" asked Hannibal, in no actual desire to ask Beverly for help.

“No, don’t tell her about this,” sharply replied Will, honing a dagger deep glare out of the corner of his eyes. He didn’t need Beverly knowing about this either, especially after she warned him not to.

“She will find out by her own means if you do not rest.”

Will’s face drew up in a scowl as he reluctantly slacked his shoulders menially, putting more of his weight on the floor.

“Fine,” he grumbled, slumping in defeat, knowing that Hannibal made a good point.

Before Will could attempt to push himself off the floor, he felt a pair of hands plant onto his waist. He winced a little in pain before his face involuntarily flushed with a pale pink. His ears grew warm as his heart pounded in his throat.

Will murmured a tenuous “Thank you,” as he shifted his weight onto Hannibal’s chest and left shoulder. He smelled of a sweet and light cologne, not too overpowering. Will caught a little whiff of the smell attributed to newly cleaned sheets and spices. He dipped his forehead onto Hannibal’s shoulder as the older man lifted the both of them up, cognizant of where Will was injured as to not press against them.

“I’ve prepared dinner,” lilted Hannibal, his hand leaving one side of Will’s waist. A ghostly warmth lingered at Will’s left side, as his disappointment to the loss of touch inculcated in his heart.

Hannibal guided Will with ease into a chair as he marveled the capacious kitchen. The dim lighting made Will relax as he calmed his erratic breathing and attempted to do the same with his racing heart. The air was strewn with a light aroma, with the pot on the stove still steaming. The flavor freely charted and explored the room, captivating Will’s attention.

“Is that..?” began Will trailing off as he couldn’t quite place the smell. It was a little nostalgic, though not exactly comforting.

“Chicken soup. Made with wolfberries, ginseng, ginger, red dates, and star anise. My very recipe.”

“Oh,” murmured Will, as a warm feeling suffused throughout his body. The act of cooking for him was already thought enough, yet it was also specified as an intended remedy.

Will fidgeted with the hem of his shirt, bringing the fabric in between his fingers and over his thumbs as he awkwardly waited on the chair. He snapped out of his nervous tics as it occurred to him again that this wasn’t his shirt. It was a size too big for an undershirt he usually wore and the quality of the shirt felt ludicrously posh.

Is this Hannibal’s?

Will immediately ducked his head while trying to shake free of the idling thought, only adding fuel to his already smoldering cheeks and ears. His blush naturally returned with every thought, unlikely to be cooled.

“I do hope it is up to par. I accept all feedback impartially. Miss Katz usually offers quite a few on my baking, albeit poor ones,” added Hannibal, placing down a bowl of the soup in front of Will.

“Thank you,” softly exhaled Will as he brought the spoon up onto his parted lips.

It encompassed a silky texture, coating Will’s throat with a homely taste of chicken broth. The warmth of the soup trailed down his stomach, as Will exhaled a sigh in satisfaction.

“It’s delicious,” commented Will, as he slowly brought another spoonful of broth up to his lips. It tasted fresh and warm, not remembering the last homemade meal he had. His pallid lips quivered, feeling a weighing guilt.

“Sorry, you shouldn’t need to do this,” uttered Will.

“I have decided to consider apologies sparingly, Will. I only hope you will tire of them soon,” replied Hannibal, amidst his preparations for what seemed like his next meal.

Before Will could protest, he suddenly remembered his belongings, which were taken from him again. He gripped on until his knuckles turned white with constriction. He let his fingernails sink into his palms and even that was futile.

Again.

He choked on a sob as a lump clawed up to his throat, unable to formulate words.

“I lost it,” blurted out Will, immediately regretting his sudden words. Hannibal didn’t need to know.

“Lost?” inquired Hannibal, turning to look at Will.

“My scarf and hat,” warbled Will, his immense guilt knotting in the dregs of his heart.

“You haven’t. They are on your nightstand,” crooned Hannibal, turning to face Will as he spoke this time.

“Nightstand?” began Will, as the burdening weight promptly diminished. He eagerly pushed from out of his seat, wincing from the throbbing pain in his side before twisting his body towards the bedroom.

“Lost is the wrong choice of diction, wouldn’t you say, Will? It is not lost if it is taken.”

“I guess,” muttered Will, sheepishly sinking back down into his chair, realizing his brash and sudden urgency to see it for himself.

“What black cat have you crossed recently to always need to find yourself helping me?” scoffed Will.

“It is only you who sees it as bad luck. What black cat have you crossed recently, Will?”

“Actually,” began Will, frowning as he found himself pondering about his own rhetorical question.

“I have come across a black cat. A stray who had a collar,” replied Will, exhaling a low laugh.

“A crime not to elaborate,” replied Hannibal, a hint of amusement weaved into his voice.

“I guess that’s the only weird part. It had a collar,” shrugged Will, tilting the bowl back with both hands to drink the rest of the soup. Will sighed with satisfaction as he felt his eyelids droop dangerously low. He tried to stifle a yawn as he rubbed his eyes, standing up to bring the bowl into the sink.

“Thank you, Hannibal,” whispered Will, as Hannibal came to help Will back into the bedroom. The older man shifted his hand back onto Will’s side as Will draped his arm over Hannibal’s neck.

“My pleasure,” reciprocated Hannibal, in a light and fleeting whisper, which caused Will to shiver a little.

The scent of a coppery iron was made out from Hannibal’s hands as Will shifted some of his weight onto him. As soon as Will made it into the bedroom, his eyes darted apprehensively to the mahogany nightstand. There it was. The incarnadine, merlot red of the scarf. The boreal, forest green of his hat.

Will’s quarry blue eyes sheened with a glaze of tears as he exhaled a tremulous breath, slacking his tense shoulders almost in full. But before he could fully relax, he realized he had forgotten something else.

“Where’s my jacket?”

“It was not on you when I found you,” replied Hannibal. Will saw the slight pursing of Hannibal’s lips as he dubiously narrowed his eyes.

“But my scarf and hat were?”

“That is perhaps a stretch, but there is some truth to it,” answered Hannibal.

Will let out a low sigh as he knew he wouldn’t get off without the loss of something. However, he would choose to lose his jacket over any of his other belongings.

“I know ‘thank you’s’ won’t suffice but thank you,” exhaled Will as he flopped onto the springy mattress.

“And that may be something else you should consider using sparingly, Will. With every use, it harbors less value,” replied Hannibal as he left the bedroom.

“I’ll find some other way to thank you when it comes to that,” lightly called out Will, partly in good humor.

An unfamiliar feeling coursed through Will as he felt himself smile, sinking into the duvet covers on the bed. He stretched out on the bed, basking in the solacing warmth before yawning aloud. Will flipped over the blanket before snugging into the bed, only missing the warmth of his dogs.

—

Hollowed eyes and the thick smell of copper. A disgustingly sublime sheen of dark red on my own hands.

Will jerked awake as he hyperventilated until his lungs burned. His curls stuck to his forehead as his shirt did to his back.

His throat felt raw as he croaked a curse, feeling the pool of sweat on the bedsheet.

Fucking nightmares.

Will grunted a strained pain as he sat up from the bed, throwing the duvet cover off his body. An immediate relief of coolness hit him as he shifted out of the bed. His footsteps barely held his weight as

he tried to lightly tread out the door. The periodic cool breeze flowing in from the window wasn't something Will usually sought, but this time was different. He needed the comfort of the breeze.

With caution, he gingerly twisted the knob of the door as he pulled it open, relinquishing the heat of his body for the serenity he was feeling on a winter night.

On the porch, just for a bit.

Will stepped out onto the porch and sat by the steps, pulling down the sleeves of his shirt. He had to periodically remind himself that it was in fact not his shirt, but Hannibal’s.

Will leaned onto the wooden handles of the steps as he sighed in satisfaction of the refreshing wind, basking in tranquility.

The pale moonlight lightly gave the snow on the street a milky luminosity, glimmering in a reflection of the stars.

“A waning gibbous,” came a voice behind Will.

And again, he knew with punctuality who it belonged to. Aside from the fact that it could *only* belong to the other person living in the house, Will gravitated towards the sound of the foreign man’s voice.

Will hummed in agreement as he stared up at the same moon, acknowledging its simplistic beauty.

“What’s keeping you awake?” murmured Will, at a hollow whisper.

“Some of my patients are rather difficult,” sighed Hannibal, approaching the steps to sit next to Will.

Will turned his head to look at Hannibal as he felt his heart rate pick up. He only hoped the darkness was able to hide his face, growing hotter by each second.

Under the moonlight, it was easy to tell what Hannibal was wearing. It was a sable-black piped shawl, loosely tied at the waist. The fabric glossed beneath the light as it lightly tugged behind with each movement. Underneath, Will spotted a loose button up shirt, with the top button being spared. The older man’s hair had seemed slightly disheveled, almost as if a hand ran through the same spot several times.

Will’s inner monologue chided himself as he whipped his face forward, staring at the steps.

“Oh I see,” replied Will, distractedly preening his sleeve.

“And may I ask why you are awake?”

“Just wanted some fresh air,” lied Will, not wanting Hannibal to know the real reason he was awake. He sighed in satisfaction as the wind aired out underneath the baggy shirt, drafting against his skin.

“Sorry, your shirt’s basically ruined,” grimaced Will, pulling the damp shirt off his body by the collar.

“I do not see any striking problem with that. From my assessment, you have felt far too little warmth for the Winter,” replied Hannibal, with the corner of his lips tugging up into a barely noticeable smile.

Will hummed a little in acceptance as he felt himself shiver, instinctively bringing up his hands to rub against his biceps.

“Is that perhaps enough fresh air for the night?” asked Hannibal, standing up from the steps.

“I think so,” yawned Will, as he limbered out his arms to his back, enjoying the stretch.

For the millionth time today, Will felt a lithe hand sinuously press onto his side as he was helped up. He couldn’t say if he would ever get used to the feeling.

“Thank you, Dr. Lecter,” sighed Will, a little peeved at his own inability to move without assistance.

“Are we not on a first name basis?” asked Hannibal, his voice tuned with light humor.

“We could be,” shrugged Will as he bit his lip, struggling to contain his smile.

“Or does one prefer reciprocity, Professor Graham?”

Will snorted and rolled his eyes at the doctor for the title before growing curious.

“How did you know I used to teach?” inquired Will, carefully stepping over the step into Hannibal’s home.

“The books you have published have certainly asserted that fact. Am I correct to assume, Professor Graham?”

He’s read my books.

Will felt a small spark alight on his face as he saw Hannibal under the lights of his kitchen. Everything he couldn’t see underneath the moonlight’s illumination he saw now.

“You are,” murmured Will, flopping down onto a chair as he felt the doctor’s hand leave his side. He squinted at the clock trying to make out where the hour and minute hand landed.

5:18.

Oh.

It was much later than Will expected, feeling a slight teeming disappointment.

“I’ll leave in the morning,” whispered Will, wishing his voice hadn’t been so low and obviously dispirited.

“And where will you leave to?” asked Hannibal, his eyes flitting towards Will.

“I’ll find a place,” replied Will, putting his head down onto his folded arms. He detested the feeling of reliance and Hannibal was nothing but hospitable to him.

“I would prefer that you do not, for haste will only hinder progress,” lilted Hannibal, starting a pot of coffee in a machine Will was unfamiliar with.

“You’re starting your day already?” perked up Will, a little in surprise. But it at least meant that he could talk to Hannibal before the sun rose, dictating when morning is to come.

“My job can be quite a demanding one at times,” replied Hannibal, placing a cup of coffee in front of Will.

Will murmured a small ‘Oh,’ before picking it up with his hand and gingerly bringing it to his lips. “And you burden yourself with an extra babysitting job,” snorted Will, in between sips of the coffee.

Will’s eyes immediately lit up at the smooth and rich texture of the coffee. It tasted of a luscious roast, deeply simmering and brewing on his tongue.

“You are not a child, Will. I am performing the duties of a doctor.” My privilege,” hummed the cook as the gas from the stove hissed to life, bringing about a saltating flame.

A sizzle and crackle came from the pot as the conversant scent of eggs and sausage traversed the room. It was rustic yet consolatory, leading Will to eagerly sit up in response. He

swallowed to rid of his salivating mouth as he apprehensively shifted in his seat to look at the contents in the pan.

“Feed the body, feed the mind. I do hope you find it palatable,” began Hannibal as he reached into a cabinet for a plate.

“Won’t be a problem,” answered Will in gulps, his eyes still trained on the pan.

If he wasn’t mistaken, Will heard Hannibal exhale a small laugh. Will immediately snapped out of his reverie as Hannibal placed down a plate of nostalgia in front of him.

Bagel, eggs, and sausage.

Will’s stomach growled in impatience as the insatiable hunger seemed inconceivable to surfeit. A thin sheen of fat was visible on the sausage underneath the light. The browning butter generously coated the eggs as the golden crusted bagels looked too perfect to sink his teeth into.

“Thank you,” exhaled Will in anticipation as he swallowed, causing his Adam’s apple to bob. He picked up the fork beside the plate and promptly got to work.

Will let out a moan in satisfaction for the outburst of flavors as he chewed away at the eggs.

“It’s delicious,” managed Will, muffled by the bagel he was chewing.

He eagerly stabbed his fork into the sausage before feeling the suffocating consequences of rushing his breakfast. Will took several swigs of his coffee as he let out an exultant sigh upon feeling the knot of bagel in his chest start to dissipate.

“Beauty in simplicity,” trailed off Hannibal, walking out of the kitchen.

Will gave a mix of a hum and grunt in response as he went hard at work on the sausage. Before he realized it, his plate was left spotless, leaving behind no evidence of any crumbs. The now full Will yawned and stretched out as his eyes landed on the formally dressed Hannibal.

It was just as appealing as the sight of him in his sleepwear, matching suit and tie in color. Will felt his eyes dart around to Hannibal’s couch and carpet.

“Whenever you are ready, Will. Why don’t we see Miss Katz off today?”

“Alright,” sheepishly muttered Will, apprehensively standing up from his chair before letting out a stifled scowl in pain. The pain had gotten to a more manageable level, fading to a dull throb.

“I have started a bath for you. Clean up and you will find your clothing in your room,” added Hannibal as he collected Will’s plate from the table.

Will nodded as he muttered another phrase of gratitude, walking to the bathroom. It was as big as the other rooms, with a dark and calming ambiance. If he squinted, the still drowsy

man could make out light steam rising from the bath.

Will undressed, pulling his shirt over his head. He would redress his wounds later as he shimmied his pants off as well. Will dipped his toes in the tub before dunking his leg in, one by one, simultaneously sighing at the perfect temperature.

"*Fuck, it feels amazing*," exhaled Will, not remembering when he was able to bathe and not shower underneath the stinging ice cold water of the gym.

He pushed himself back until he was leaning up against the back of the bathtub and rubbed his shoulders, scowling at the pain. Will reached up to the sink to grab the shampoo bottle as he pumped a mound into his hand. He scrubbed the shampoo into his damp hair as he generously massaged his scalp. As the foam started to build up, Will caught a whiff of the shampoo. *It smelled like Hannibal.*

The bathing man stopped short in his movements as he murmured a short 'oh,' unsure of what he expected. It smelled fresh, alike the light petrichor smell after a hazy rain.

Will let the iridescent bubbles adorn his neck before he snapped out of his thoughts, lowering his head into the water to rinse off the soap. The smell wasn't strong, yet was bound to linger in the roots of his curls.

After rinsing off the remaining soap in his hair, he reached for the bottle of body wash. Will swallowed, unsure if he was allowed to use Hannibal's body wash. A small tug and war ensued in his head until at last, he reluctantly squeezed a small mound onto his hand, slathering it over the gauze-free parts of his body. It was fresh and comforting.

Repeating the same fluid action of washing off the soap, Will cleaned himself off of any residual bubbles on his body before stepping out of the bathtub and drying himself off with the towel that was neatly hung on the rack.

The same with a toothbrush and razor was found on the sink, with Will eagerly tossing his old one. The unshaven man held the razor, letting the cool blade kiss his chin as he glided it down, cutting away the uneven stubble. As clips of hair littered the sink, Will picked up the small bottle next to the razor.

Aftershave?

The now shaven man turned the bottle over in his hand a few times as he shrugged, applying the cool gel to his chin. Its smell wasn't overpowering and alike his shampoo, had a light and fleeting smell he couldn't quite place.

A small box was placed on the sink as well, with Will suspecting that it held the proper materials to redress his wound. As he lifted open the box, he lightly exhaled a laugh, seeing it filled with gauze, bandages, scissors, medical tape and other supplies.

The previously soaked bandages were promptly tossed away, with Will trying to replicate the way Hannibal had dressed his wounds. It came as no surprise that Will was not able to match the doctor's precise layering and deliberate angles. Will sighed, looking at the messy way his

bandages vined around his waist, wishing that Hannibal would've been the one to redress his wounds. Not bothering to put his shirt on again, Will stepped out of the bathroom, looking around the hallways for signs of Hannibal.

With the coast being clear, Will rushed into the room which he stayed in the night prior. And therein lied his *supposed* clothing, neatly folded and tucked. In addition with some of his clothes, there were some things Hannibal decided to add into the pile.

His hand brushed over another article of clothing, which was thicker and insulated with fur. It was a navy blue fleece, which felt extremely soft to the touch.

Will's heart thumped louder than he would have liked as he turned to the mirror, grimacing at his own reflection. The gauze did an amateurish job at hiding the purplish brutality. His unruly hair perked up in some angles and laid flaccid on others.

The black thermal wear was a perfect fit, as it snugly hugged Will's body. Will quickly pulled on his plaid flannel and his old worn out sweater before pulling on the fleece which was provided by Hannibal. He zipped it up to his neck as he felt the strands of fur tickle his neck and chin, having recently shaved it. He quickly slipped on his jeans before reaching eagerly for his scarf and hat. His hat was shimmied down to his ears as he pulled the scarf around his neck in haste.

The fully dressed Will tried to pat down the hair which stuck out from his hat as he grabbed his glasses off the nightstand, shoving them into the pocket of his fleece. He exited the room and stepped out back into the living room, where Hannibal seemed to be busy with something.

The gentle scratching sound of rough graphite on a smooth page was made out as Will sheepishly stepped over to Hannibal, uncomfortably tugging on his sleeve.

"Hannibal?"

Hannibal calmly placed the pencil in between his notebook as he looked up at Will. His lips drew up in a smile as Will fumbled for the glasses in his fleece. *He couldn't stand to make eye contact with Hannibal now.* His heart thrummed and heartstrings reverberated as Hannibal reached to the scarf around his neck, fixing it slightly.

"And here you are, dressed for the weather," commented Hannibal as he stood up, sliding the notebook to the side of his desk.

"Mhm," hummed Will, trying to give a response which he ultimately found no words for. His attempt gave an agreement, falling short of a proper gratitude.

Will followed behind Hannibal, climbing into the passenger seat of the Bentley before the car lurched to a start. The interior of the car looked nothing like anything Will has seen, running his hand over the leather seat.

But before Hannibal drove off, Will felt a sudden weight drop into his stomach, knotting and manifesting a foreboding feeling. It felt as if he was close—too close—to the very same thing

he was supposed to avoid.

Run.

Will angrily shook his head to disregard the thought, annoyed at its incessant returning. At last, he leaned his cheeks onto the window of the car, feeling a cool relief placating the heat. His hooded eyes suddenly felt too heavy to hold up, as he gave into the drowsiness.

—

Unsure of how long it had been, Will jumped awake at the gentle swaying at his shoulder.

“Oh,” murmured Will, unceremoniously wiping away at the drool trickling down the corner of his mouth. He promptly regretted it, forgetting he was wearing the new fleece.

The still languid man rubbed his eyes as his rebellious curls were shoveled into a mound on the left side of his head. His frank blue eyes blinked awake as he rubbed the bridge of his nose, exiting the car.

Will pulled opened the handle to the café as he felt the taller man follow behind him. The jingling of the bell was now comforting to Will as his eyes made a beeline to the counter.

“My, my. The both of them, huh?” petulantly asked Beverly as soon as Will was in proximity.

“Y-yeah so what?” shot back Will, avoiding Beverly’s eyes and her predictably wagging eyebrows.

As soon as Will pulled out the seat underneath the counter, Hannibal appeared beside him, mirroring the action.

“So how was it?” asked Beverly, her devilish grin still perking.

“How was what?” asked Will with genuine confusion.

“The sex,” said Beverly, in a matter-of-factly manner as she rolled her eyes, a little annoyed at Will’s obliviousness.

“The what?”asked Will, choking on his reply. There was now no doubt that a kindling would catch fire if brought close enough to his face, as a ferocious blush painted his cheeks red.

“Dunno but aftercare looks great to me,” remarked Beverly with a smirk, eyeing Will’s new fleece and cleaner demeanor. His curls looked soft and bouncy under the light, unlike his usual knotted and wiry hair. Will’s now shaven figure made him look more composed.

Will grumbled in annoyance as his attempt to form a defense fell short. Nothing he would say could change Beverly’s mind when it was set on a path. And as if on cue, Beverly suddenly leaned across the counter, seemingly sniffing Will’s hair.

“Are you sure you two didn’t fuck?” asked Beverly, crossing her arms as she raised an eyebrow.

“I can say with certainty that I am quite sure,” replied Hannibal in a calm and mannered voice.

“He smells like you,” commented Beverly, narrowing her eyes, which was accompanied by a small roguish smile.

“Yes, naturally one should when using the same products,” replied Hannibal, holding eye contact with Beverly.

“Oh my, shameless,” impishly replied Beverly.

Will nervously wrung his hands underneath the counter, unsure what to say in defense. Maybe there was nothing he could say in defense. Maybe there was nothing he wanted to say in defense.

“So how was the job?” asked Beverly.

“Didn’t get it,” shrugged Will, trying to dismiss it.

“What kind of fishing job rejects a fisherman?”

“No fishing job. ‘Position already filled’ was all,” said Will, without much care. Beverly was quite observant when she wanted to be, or rather, in general.

“Bummer, looks like someone from the kitchen is going to leave with a cardboard box today,” shrugged Beverly.

“Don’t even think about it,” snorted Will, rolling his eyes.

“Am thinking about it,” replied Beverly.

“Then think about the fact that I would never work for you,” offered Will.

“We both know that’s not true,” hummed Beverly.

The amused man gave a short laugh as he turned towards Hannibal, seeing his line of focus. It was to the television mounted on the wall, focusing on the news anchor.

“Anything new on the Ripper?” asked Will, redirecting his attention towards the TV.

“I don’t suspect so,” answered Hannibal.

“Suspect? You mean it’s not just random?”asked Beverly, tilting back a cup of coffee, also changing her view to the TV.

“No, he doesn’t just kill to gratify his own spleen,” answered the ex-profiler, seeing only the weather channel for the week. A prediction of snow for the next three days. A groan rose up before he suppressed it, knowing he would be at least somewhat warmer with his new clothing.

But nothing new on the Ripper.

“Soooo Will,” began Beverly, dragging out her words.

“What,” groaned Will, already suspecting her next few words to be trouble, if not for him then Hannibal.

“Where are you planning on staying?”

“My home,” scoffed Will. It wasn’t completely sarcastic although it exuded the right kind of tone.

“Which is where?” asked Beverly.

“Same old tent and street,” shrugged Will, not giving Beverly the satisfaction of the answer she wanted to hear.

“Aw really?” asked Beverly, seemingly disappointed.

“Yes really,” replied Will, exhaling a small laugh, somewhat amused.

“Hannibal, you’re letting that happen?” asked Beverly, pointedly towards the man Will had been with the night prior.

“Will is welcome in my home anytime he wishes to pay a visit,” replied Hannibal.

“Well that’s not going to be happening,” shrugged Will, already hating the fact that he’d received so much.

“Did we watch the same weather channel? Because you know it’s going to be snowing for the next three days, right?” asked Beverly, her words laced in slight annoyance.

“I know that,” affirmed Will, shooting a glare at Beverly.

“Just don’t need a crying sobbing Hannibal in my café, like last time, if you die,” shrugged Beverly.

“What?” asked Will furrowing his eyebrows. He wasn’t sure if he was more confused about a ‘sobbing Hannibal’ or more curious about ‘last time’.

“Right Hannibal?”

“It seems like the only language Miss Katz is fluent in is lying.”

“Stubborn much,” murmured the manager, leaving the counter to satisfy the pullulating crowd of customers.

Will sighed a laugh as he buried his face into his fleece, letting out a modest yawn. He stretched out as he let out a satisfied moan, rubbing his eyes underneath his frames. He

dipped his face onto his folded arms, both floating and drowning in his own stupor, looking at Hannibal. He zoned out, as his sight hazed.

“Will,” came a low voice from beside him.

Focusing back to reality after some time, Will immediately snapped out of his daydream as his face promptly grew to a beet red.

“Sorry I didn’t mean to..,” trailed off Will, knowing he had accidentally been starring.

“Never apologize for events which happen out of your locus of control,” replied Hannibal, arising with his coat in hand. “But I must take my leave.”

The psychiatrist reached into his pocket, withdrawing a small business card in between his fingers, handing it over to Will.

“Visit me in my office whenever you wish, Will. For any reason or for none at all, consider paying me one,” finished Hannibal, grabbing his overcoat by the collar and swooping the jacket over his shoulder.

“I will,” lowly hummed Will, in apparent consideration.

“I’ll be expecting you then,” whispered Hannibal, leaning in close to Will’s ear.

A shiver ran up Will’s spine as he straightened out, blinking as his blush grew to an to an even darker hue of vermillion. Before Will could get a chance to say anything (though he was rather unsure if he *could’ve* said anything), Hannibal took long strides out the door, his overcoat rippling behind him.

Will looked down at the card which he held between his thumb and index finger, tracing over the small indented letters of the card.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

His eyes left the card as he looked up for Beverly. No signs of her. Will slipped the business card into his left pocket, making sure it would stay in mint condition. Again, he would have to leave a note for Beverly. The man plucked a pen from the holder on the counter as he clicked the tip into use.

Be back tomorrow. - Will.

Will slid the finished note onto the counter as he pushed the chair back to leave. As usual, the cool air stung his cheeks as he opened the door of the café, stepping out to start the trek back to the convenient store from last time. He would find another job.

—

Stopping in front of the same window as last time, Will skimmed over the list of flyers.

Tutoring, delivery, and more. Nothing much I could do.

Without a credible image nor a mode of transportation, there was no way he could qualify for either of the jobs. His erratic eyes darted from flyer to poster until he stopped in front of one.

Laundromat maintenance mechanic needed.

Will stretched his hand out, peeling the flyer from off the wall as he read over the flyer again. He could do this. Fixing machines wouldn't be a problem for him, especially given his deft ability and experience.

Checking the address, Will didn't recognize it, although he wasn't expecting to anyways. He folded up the paper, shoving it into his right pocket before taking off again. He wouldn't be able to start the job until he knew where it was and he didn't want to visit the café multiple times per day. Will would visit again tomorrow, making sure to ask then.

Back to the tent then.

It was an easy few blocks back to the tent as Will slowly shuffled through the snow. His new socks (provided by Hannibal) were insulating the warmth of his feet quite well as compared to his old, ragged ones. His hat and scarf protected his head and neck from the unrelenting elements.

The familiar corner of the building came into view as the man under a lethargic spell paced into the alleyway, slumping against the brick wall underneath the tent. Despite the sun's still risen position, it greatly contrasted against Will's penchant to take a short nap. Just a nap.

Hands which paint purple on the neck, like a stretched canvas. His own.

—

Will woke with a choking cough as his lungs tried to gather as much air as it could. His chestnut curls stuck to his forehead from perspiration as a weak groan escaped his parted lips. The roused man rubbed the nape of his neck, seeing a sheen of sweat glossing his fingers. His glasses felt too heavy to sit on his nose as he shucked them off, sticking the pair into his right pocket.

" *Fuck* ," croaked Will, exhaling a breath of exhaustion.

His fingers instinctively reached for the comforting card in his left pocket, as he reached to pull out the card he had received with his scarf. Forgetting the extra card in his pocket, Will pulled out the first card he felt.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

The slightly confused man brought the card up close, examining the letters. The next line detailed his address, which sounded vaguely familiar. Will scrambled to get to his feet, scanning the block for the street sign.

Viza Street.

A look back down on the card confirmed it. Hannibal's office was on this exact street.

Will felt his breath quicken as it slightly hitched, the sudden jump in cadence matching his surprise. He would only have to walk down the street to the next block to find Hannibal's office. If Will squinted hard enough, he could make out the green street sign for the next street. It wasn't far.

"For any reason or none at all."

Will reread over the street address once more with the intention of memorizing. He reread each letter and whispered each number out loud.

17-20, Viza Street.

Starting from the end of the street, Will began his walk, still in disbelief that Hannibal's office would have been so readily available and nearby.

The first building was a residential home, unsuitable to be used as an office setting. The steels letters bolted onto the door of the house read "12-20."

Five more.

The hopeful man skipped past the next couple of houses as he stopped in front of the mailbox printed with the red numbers "16-20."

"What?" Will questioned out loud.

The slightly confused man urgently scrubbed his eyes as he blinked in an attempt to dismissive the fog which clouded his eyes and quite possibly, mind. This was the building right next to the tent he would stay under. This whole time, he had been outside of Hannibal's office. Enchanted upon by pure serendipity, shivering by the notion of blind luck.

Taking definitive steps, Will walked to the door of 17-20, confirmed by the golden plaque by the wall of the door. And there it was.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

Will slightly exhaled a shaky breath as his steps lightly treaded with anxiety. Two raps echoed from the wooden door as Will robotically brought his knuckles in contact with it, cringing as he heard the knock.

I can't.

Abandoning his plan to visit, Will suddenly turned on the heel of his shoes, scrambling off the steps before he heard the click of a lock.

"Will."

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

I have decided to merge posted chapters (2) together because it means more content for you guys in the same amount of time and negates the necessity to post too many chapters / drag on the series. I also wanted consistency in the word count since this chapter was designated to be at this length.

All chapters posted biweekly (hopefully) from now will now be 5.5k-6k words. ؜

It Can No Longer Guide

Chapter Notes

The chapter that changed the rating of this fic is here woah

This series is probably going to end in a few chapters (most probably subject to change).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Oh,” exhaled Will, as he slightly groaned, turning to face Hannibal.

The psychiatrist was dressed in the suit from earlier this morning, the patterned red and black. An intrusive sniffle came from inside, as Will swiftly turned back down the steps, knowing he had disturbed a session.

“Sorry, I didn’t tell you I was going to stop by,” sheepishly murmured Will, taking a step down the stairs.

“We were just about finished. Please, Will, come inside,” replied Hannibal as he opened the door further, stepping out of the entry to invite Will inside.

The latter shuffled back up the stairs and inside, tensely stepping onto the carpet and drying off his wet soles before unzipping his fleece. It was warm in Hannibal’s office and the ambience felt even more allaying. The mahogany bookshelf was a marvel, blending into the darkness of the office.

“Franklyn, I’m afraid our time is up for today.”

The patient unceremoniously blew into his tissue in response as he waddled out the office. The echoing yet sharp click of the door was all Will needed to start pacing around the room, wiping his palms on his thighs.

“Sorry if this is a bad time,” hastily outed Will, nervously throwing a glance at Hannibal.

“Never a time will be a bad one,” smoothly replied Hannibal as he undid the button of his suit, taking a seat back down on his chair. The psychiatrist motioned the restive man before him to the couch before him before crossing his legs and twining his fingers together loosely.

“Right,” murmured Will, gently setting himself down, trying to be as polite as possible despite his intrusion.

“I, um, don’t exactly have a reason for visiting,” confessed Will, sticking his hand back into his pocket, reaching for his glasses.

“As I recall from what I have said, a visitation from you need not require reason or time.”

Will sighed as he sunk back against the couch, running his nails against the uneven scratches of his glasses in his palms. A heavy guilt ladened his shoulders as he tapped his pointer finger against the leather, attempting to formulate a reply back.

“I guess for conversation, I found a job,” started Will.

“Is it to your satisfaction?”

“Sort of, it works out. Can’t be a chooser,” replied Will, purposely omitting the beggar addendum. He didn’t have the autonomy of a chooser but he wasn’t a beggar.

“And what do your plans for the rest of today detail?” asked Hannibal, momentarily shifting his legs.

“Well this visit was a spur of the moment kind of thing,” said Will, yawning as his shoulders went lax on the couch.

“Perhaps the remedy of all things ill is rest,” spoke Hannibal, as Will covered his mouth, biting down on the urge to yawn once more.

“Your injuries have yet to heal. Haste will present itself if you do not listen to its warning. I would prefer that you stay and recover,” continued the doctor.

“In your office?” inquired Will, somewhat hesitant to fall asleep in the place Hannibal worked.

“I will allow you privacy as I work,” indirectly affirmed Hannibal, standing up from his seat. The psychiatrist’s long strides took him to another room by the end of the hallway.

Taking the opportunity, Will stiffly laid down on his side onto the couch, creating a makeshift pillow from his folded arms. He exhaled slowly, letting his breath twined with anxiety flow, replaced by the serene scent of old books and wood.

—

“*Hannibal, more,*” moaned Will as he rolled his hips against the knee pressed right beneath his pulsating cock.

“What do I remind you comes of haste?” cooed Hannibal, leaning down onto the side of Will’s ear.

Another moan bubbled up to Will’s chest as he only felt the restriction of his boxers, wishing to feel maximum pleasure. Hannibal continued to stroke his cock through the fabric, teasingly thumbing over the slit, where precum stained the fabric dark.

“C-close,” desperately slurred Will, his words laden with intoxication from the pleasure.

Will let out a wanton exhale as he felt a sliver of arousal tease his spine, feeling the pressure of Hannibal's fingers running up his shaft. He felt the older man's teeth grazing upon the skin of his neck before feeling his grip tighten on his cock.

"*Fuck,*" warbled Will, as his words nearly degraded to a shuddering request.

A wave of pleasure coursed throughout him as he felt his own cum trailing down in his boxers, coming from being barely touched, with his boxers on, much less.

—

Will gasped for a breath as he blinked awake, feeling the throbbing of his cock in his jeans. A shameful blush infected his cheeks red as he palmed his hardened cock, which was undoubtedly leaking precum.

All and only from a dream.

Attempting to catch his breath, Will fumbled for his glasses as he stood up from the couch. His knees nearly gave out as he groped along the hallway wall to the door he presumed to belong to the bathroom.

As soon as Will stumbled into the bathroom, he fumbled with the lock of the door, jiggling the door handle to make sure that it was locked.

Even the ambience of the bathroom was perfect; somber and dim. Almost ashamed to disturb the atmosphere, Will pulled down the seat of the toilet before sliding himself free of his pants. His still hard cock tented in his boxers, hungry for satiation and aching for gratification.

"*Fuck*," groaned Will as he rubbed the bridge of his nose, the fervid blush on his cheeks traveling to his ears.

What am I? Fucking 16?

Letting out a shaky breath, Will shut his eyes, running his fingertips up his clothed cock. A surge of pleasure shot up Will as he stifled a moan, instinctively arching his back in a plea for more. A pool of arousal brewed in his stomach as he brushed over the slit of his cock, feeling a rush of pearlish precum dribble out, staining his boxers. Like his dream.

Will leaned back onto the stinging cold of the porcelain tank before allowing himself to sate his hedonistic desire. Will imagined himself propped against Hannibal, back to chest, his hands constricting onto Hannibal's wrist, trying to force it for more. Hannibal's deft fingers glided a feathery touch upon every inch, degrading Will to join his words in slurring for more.

He wanted to feel the soft grazing of teeth kneading his shoulders, a swipe of the tongue by his neck, bared for Hannibal. A clean canvas for him to paint indigo and violet. The thought in itself made Will perspire a low "please," as he sighed in satisfaction, rubbing the tip through the fabric.

Settling to leave his boxers on, Will pinched the fabric of his boxers between his fingers, the pulling and dragging sensation eliciting a low moan from his parted lips. Nearing climax, Will shifted his cock out of his boxers, nearly thrusting his hips into his own hands as he stroked, imagining the melody of the thick accent flow. A whispered lyric of praise, imbued with lust.

"*Truly a marvel you are, darling.*"

The last stroke was all it took to send Will over the tipping point, evoking a guttural moan accompanied by the trickling sensation of his own cum oozing down his wrist.

Immediate shame crashed over Will as if washing his hands free of the residual sin was an act of penitence. Will pumped a mound of soap into his hands, scrubbing to rid of the embarrassment more than the evidence.

He redressed his jeans and boxers before shaking his hands free of the water. The door unlocked as Will stepped out, sighing as he weakly walked back to the couch.

"I am hopeful that you found it enjoyable?" asked Hannibal, who was at his desk, leafing through sketches.

"W-what was enjoyable?" squeaked Will, jumping back as his heart rate suddenly rushed to a rapid thrumming. His face suddenly grew hot, a dangerously shade of red overtaking his cheeks.

"Rest," simply replied Hannibal.

"O-oh yeah," blurted Will, nearly doubling over in relief. He took a sigh of relief as he shuffled over to Hannibal's desk, looking at the various sketches.

"You drew these?" asked Will, in a hushed tone. The pointed details contrasted with the brushes of dusted graphite from shading.

"An attempt at recreating the places I have committed to memory," nodded Hannibal, looking to the side of him, catching Will's eyes.

"Attempt? I'd argue it was a lot more than that," replied Will, rubbing his chin while letting out an air of laughter.

"Ever the flatterer, Will?"

"Thank my honest conscience," jested Will, retreating his hands from the drawings. He shifted his focus from the drawings to the bookshelf, scanning the myriad of titles.

"You have quite an extensive collection," exhaled Will, walking over to the bookshelf.

"I pride myself on knowledge, others see it as vulnerability if they do not," replied Hannibal, walking to meet Will.

“Don’t you fear vulnerability?” inquired Will, seeing that the Hannibal he knew never showed much chagrin.

“If man has anything to fear, vulnerability is sure to follow,” replied Hannibal.

“So anyone, huh,” spoke Will, looking up at Hannibal.

“Vulnerability is not to be tamed, but to be tailored as a leverage,” nodded Hannibal, rebuttoning his blazer.

“Ironic,” muttered Will, moving away from the bookshelf.

“Shall we make our way to my house?” asked Hannibal, putting on his navy overcoat. It was one Will hadn’t seen yet, though he couldn’t imagine anything Hannibal owned didn’t look good on him.

“No,” said Will, zipping up his fleece.

“I’ve got somewhere to be,” he lied. Will was getting dangerously comfortable and the definition of independence was starting to blur.

“May I ask where that may be? At a quarter past eleven?” questioned Hannibal, not accompanied by any tone of skepticism. Will detected more curiosity and perhaps a little amusement.

“I-I just wanted to check up on my tent. Maybe I’ll catch them,” muttered Will, thinking of any excuse he could, feasible or not. It wasn’t exactly a lie for it was half true. He had been waiting for the opportunity to see whoever was dropping by the tent.

“Very well then. Until we meet again,” lightly replied Hannibal, knowing it wouldn’t be long, before opening the door as he gestured Will out.

Will ushered a quick “thank you,” as he stepped out of the office, momentarily stunned by the difference in temperature.

Upon hearing the door of the Bentley shutting and the wheels crunching on the snow of the road, Will paced quick steps to his tent. The snow by his tent had been melting, though there was still enough to catch any footprints. As expected, there were none, other than paw prints.

Making out a tail, Will shuffled underneath his tent, squatting by the sleeping black bundle of fur. The whipped man exhaled a fond laugh as he moved underneath the tent, seeing a neat pile of mice.

“Hm,” murmured Will, rather amused. Letting out a low chuckle, he drooped his cheek onto his arms, letting his breathing even out.

—

The morning sun rose as Will rubbed his eyes awake, seeing the color of the clear, blue sky reflect his own eyes. A rush of excitement filled him, as he stretched awake. A small pleasant

surprise was beside Will, as he found Verutis, still in the same spot, grooming.

Drawing up his hand, Will gently stroked the black cat as it obliged. Fur between fingers, Will slowly scratched its head before gently drawing his hand away, standing up from his spot.

Tracing the paper in his hands, Will exhaled as he walked the way to the cafe, integrating the walk into his daily routine. A right turn and crossing streets to the next block with a couple of other turns led Will to a busier part of the neighborhood.

The ex-profiler's eyebrows scrunched into a tangle as he approached the café, hearing sirens and radio activity. It was too familiar to forget. His steps quickened and breathing picked up as he made his way to the commotion.

"Beverly?" called out Will, seeing the manager in the distance. His eyes traced the yellow caution tape extensively bordering the building.

"Hey Will," said Beverly as soon as he was close enough to hear her. Her arms were folded as she kept her gaze on something.

"You're taking this somewhat well," commented Will, seeing the manager's stoic expression twined with some chagrin and anger. Beverly's eyes never left the trained spot as Will followed her gaze.

"A body," murmured Will.

A body hung from atop the wooden café sign, arms fastened to rope and strung nigh the letters. Burn marks strangled and vined around the neck of the victim, before growing and intensifying to the face and head. The face of the corpse was burned beyond recognition, ravaged even.

Will's frown deepened as he let out a breath, seeing the crimson flame dashed with lapis blue dance on the victim, tracing the neck.

Why isn't he screaming?

Will took steps forward in his vision, observing the precise slit made in the throat of the victim.

Missing the larynx and tongue.

Moreover, despite the brutal mutilation, the presence of blood was minimal to nearly null.

Body was cleaned up. Why spend effort on a victim?

Will's breathing hitched slightly as his heart drummed, pitched to a hollow and taut rhythm.

This body was presented for someone. For someone to see.

Will reached out his hand, nearly brushing upon a clue before he felt an external force pushing him back.

“Hey, you can’t be back here,” warned a police officer. Will stumbled back, defensively pulling back his shoulder from the hand that was gripping it.

“Let him,” barked a sharp voice.

“Jack,” spoke Will, in a tone lurking in ire.

“Another victim of the Chesapeake Ripper. Tell me you have a lead,” continued Jack, looking at the body.

“I don’t work for you anymore,” bitterly spat Will.

“No, but you know whatever the Chesapeake Ripper has here.”

“Your Ripper’s a show off. He’s taken a liking to somebody; a fancy, if you will. He’s a peacock. The most beautiful yet desperate one.”

Will heard Beverly grumble a low “*Ugh fuck,*” as she rubbed at her eyebrows.

“And this body was made to be presented?” asked Jack, his voice heavily laden with doubt and suspicion.

Will impatiently hummed an affirmative answer before he turned back to the body. Though he would never admit it, there was no use denying it to himself. *The Ripper’s affinity with beauty in brutality.*

“Has the body been identified?” asked Will, slowly shaking himself free of his reverie.

“Here,” spoke the gruffly voice, handing his former counterpart a file.

“Victim’s been arrested on counts of assault, theft, and intoxication. You think he had a bad run in with the Ripper?” asked Jack.

“No,” whispered Will, before continuing. “The Ripper‘s never burnt his victims before. His modus operandi slightly changed. Victim was burned alive but didn’t die from it. Not before he bled to death.”

“Burned? And the significance of that?” curtly intimated Jack, impatiently urging for the answer.

“The marks. Hard to duplicate without experience in working with flames. The marks vine and ascend in intensity from neck to face. It’s like-,” stopped Will, sighing.

“Like what?” unceremoniously urged Jack.

“Like he had something there that didn’t belong. It was akin to being sinful. Maybe stolen jewelry,”replied Will, heavy with lethargy as he rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses.

“So the Ripper’s a vigilante now,” flatly stated Jack, accompanied by a crescendoing set of eyebrows.

“This body is for somebody. They never encountered the Ripper, just the person it was intended for,” exhaled Will as feelings of overwhelm constricted against his chest.

“I’m done here, Jack,” exhaled Will.

“Look at the file before you leave,” said Jack, tone short of a request.

Swallowing an argument, Will obliged, standing passive to the situation. As Will flipped the cover of the file open, his heart plummeted into his stomach, settling with the sharp ridges of ripples dwelling. He recognized the photo. He recognized the face. The visage, a reminder of his misfortune.

From the other day. The one who took my belongings.

A serpentine confession slithered and lodged in Will’s throat as his attempt left in an airy and empty whisper.

“I have to go, Jack,” hollowly suspired Will.

He didn’t need something extra to have nightmares about. The burden of guilt was the heaviest of them all and he would be a fool to ignore it for the second time. His nightmares were a dissonance from his reality, rhythm and pitch mismatched.

“I’ll see you, Bev,” dryly whispered Will as his breathing grew to a heave. Without waiting for an answer, Will stuck his hands into his fleece, taking the steps back to the alleyway. Only, he wasn’t going back to his tent.

Will’s legs felt truncated from his own mind, taking steps more affirmative than he would have liked. The soles of his boots imprinted itself into what could only be described as a slosh of snow as he walked past his tent, only peeking through momentarily for *Verutis* . Any steps after led him in front of Hannibal’s office.

A feeling of déjà vu suddenly stopped Will in his steps as his elbows locked before he knocked. A hesitant noise escaped Will as he rocked back and forth, toe from heel, seeing no real reason to visit Hannibal.

His body must’ve been on full bouts of capricious whims as before he realized it, the still hesitant man had brought his knuckles up to the door, rapping on it twice. Will cringed at the sharp sounds as he stood in place, intensifying his rocking.

The sound of muffled footsteps approached the door as the click of a lock preceded the opening of the door. Will managed an awkward and crooked smile as he exhaled a small greeting.

“Hi,” rushed Will, averting Hannibal’s eyes. He felt a little guilty for showing up with no clear indication of a schedule.

“Will, please come in,” replied Hannibal, as the psychiatrist momentarily looked back into his office space.

He has a patient right now.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have assumed you were free, I’ll come back some other time,” murmured Will, feeling worse than earlier.

“There isn’t a need. It may fare well to end our session now,” came an unfamiliar voice.

Will peeked past the door to see a blonde woman with voluminous curls, dressed in a velvet top and skirt. Black stocking extended into her black heels as she gathered her belongings, walking towards the door. Will shuffled out of the way as he eyed the unfamiliar woman, who was making her way towards what seemed like her transportation.

“Wrath of the cold certainly does not bode well for one’s health,” mused Hannibal as he cracked open the door wider, inviting Will inside.

“Sorry for interrupting a patient session first the second time now,” sighed Will, sliding off his boots and unzipping the top of his fleece.

“She is not my patient. Doctor Bedelia Du Maurier,” corrected Hannibal as he strode towards his chair.

“Oh,” managed Will, as a feeling of disappointment settled stubbornly in his stomach.

Of course. They’re in the same profession.

“What might I owe you the pleasure of today, Will?” asked Hannibal, settling back into his chair, unbuttoning his blazer.

“The Ripper’s chosen the café as his new *social gala,*” curtly answered Will, flopping down onto the chair, with no regards to his sitting position. His legs were parted to an unceremonious gap and hips pivoted forward ever so slightly.

“How so?” questioned Hannibal, eyes never breaking away from Will’s pointed ones.

“New body spotting there,” answered Will, buzzed with an annoyance that he couldn’t quite place his finger on.

“You were stressed upon walking into my office. Certainly that isn’t the only thing you mean to tell me,” spoke Hannibal, titling his face slightly. His merlot eyes never left Will’s contrasting lumen blues.

“It isn’t, how could you tell?” inquired Will, suddenly self conscious. He suddenly sat up straighter and tenser.

“Stress has an acute smell. A bitter twinge with the slightest residual smell of a fervidity that a predator learns to bask and chase,” nodded Hannibal, his eyes flitting with some form of curiosity.

“Great, you could smell emotions,” quietly groaned Will.

“May I inquire for the catalyst of your stress?” asked Hannibal, reaching for his notebook and pencil. The leather bound notebook flipped open with the ribbon page marker following.

“My dreams—they’ve been getting disconcerting lately,” hesitantly outed Will.

“We all have dreams; may not the whole of life be a dream? What have you recently dreamt of, Will?” asked Hannibal, the light scritching sound of graphite swishing across the plane of a page.

Will unintentionally sat up straighter as he introspected about his most recent dream. The younger man’s mouth went dry as he swallowed, a blush teasing its return as a shiver fiddled down his ribs to spine.

Hannibal couldn’t know about his wet dream, absolutely not.

“Just nightmares,” quickly blurted out Will.

“I have this vision—it’s more or less the same representation each time—I’m recreating the Ripper’s tableaus,” continued Will.

“And how does that make you feel?”asked Hannibal as his eyes flitted up at the addition, momentarily pausing his pencil in place.

“We don’t have doctor-patient confidentiality,” shrugged Will as the beginning of a smug smile developed.

“Will a promise made by word of mouth be sufficient?”

“Nope.”

“Have problems with trust, Will?” began Hannibal, parroting a similar tone to Will’s.

“Should’ve known you’ve practiced psychoanalysis. Are you sure you’re fit for psychiatry?” impishly asked Will, dipping his toes into the testing waters.

“You would prefer that our relationship be a doctor-patient one?” asked Hannibal, closing his notebook with the pencil in between, before leaning forward.

“What’s our relationship like now?” mused Will.

“I see it that we are friends.”

“Is that closer than a doctor-patient one?”

“Markedly so.”

“Oh,” murmured Will, unable to pronounce his suddenly scattered thoughts.

“You’re to keep secrets under doctor-patient confidentiality by law, but if you had the choice to you could spill secrets by a friendship,” added Will.

“There are exceptions to the doctor-patient confidentiality, such as confessions to a homocide. As your friend, I would not share a mutual secret, even at that,” smoothly replied Hannibal.

Will swallowed as he struggled for a reply, Hannibal’s reply leaving him a little stunned. Though, a warm feeling settled snugly in him. Trust, he could admit, did feel nice.

“I can’t really explain it. It’s dissonant to me too. Is it reprehensible that I don’t find his tableaus disgusting or wrong?” gingerly asked Will, swallowing his mouth.

“Then what do you find them?” inquired Hannibal, with just a sliver of curiosity despite his outward attempt of trying to stay professional.

“Strangely abstract, like I’m examining from a distance. Like a viewing at a museum,” replied Will, letting out a drawled breath of laughter at his own absurd thoughts.

“You find the tableaus to be a viable representation of art, then?” inquired Hannibal, who leaned back into his seat, one leg still crossed over the other. The leather of his boots slightly sheened underneath the sunlight, glowing at its peak for the afternoon. A similar glint flickered in his eyes pointedly.

“Think I’ve just answered my own question, it does sound terrible,” said Will, as he cringed, finding another topic of conversation for the sake of changing the subject.

“But this tableau is different. It’s for somebody to see. All of his other tableaus were more or less to gratify himself,” perspired Will, leaning back into his seat. His eyebrows scrunched together, as his eyes surveyed the room, landing on a small table. Atop the table held a neat pile of sketches, organized by page size.

“What makes you so sure?” continued Hannibal with his questions.

“The disparaging change of location. I’ve never seen the crime scene of a Ripper personally up until now. Others were always through TattleCrime. This was right on the café and in public. He wants someone to see it,” absentmindedly whispered Will as he walked over the small table.

Will shuffled a few pages off the top of the pile, admiring the point perfect lining and angle perfect hatching of his pieces. One more than the others brought upon some floating feeling of familiarity.

“What’s this one for? You don’t do tattoos too, do you?” asked Will, with some humor, as he held the drawing to face Hannibal. It was a detailed drawing of a neck, bared to show an incendiary yet curbed flame, tracing to the chin.

“My acquaintances are rather adamant on that I host another dinner party. The sketch is merely a preliminary design for presentation,” smoothly replied Hannibal, as he uncrossed

his legs and strode over to Will, hovering just slightly over his shoulder.

“Looks a lot more than preliminary,” mused Will, tracing his fingers alongside the border of the hatched flame. He brought his fingers back, observing the slight smudge of graphite on his fingertips.

“I would say my latest attempt at the execution went well,” lilted Hannibal.

“Oh yea? Let me guess, first try?” scoffed Will, with good humor at a teasing tone.

“With intuition, any plan can be met to its end,” reciprocated Hannibal, with a small smile.

“It looks somewhat familiar. I can’t quite place my finger on it, though,” mused Will, leafing through some other sketches on the table. One of them made him suddenly freeze in frame, blinking in surprise before sputtering a question in confirmation.

“Is this me?”

“A muse too enticing to turn from,” murmured Hannibal, picking up the sketch of Will, drawled in sleep on the couch by the window. His one arm bent underneath his head as a pillow, with the other arm draped over his stomach.

“Wait, how long did this take you?,” blurted out Will, hoping it was nowhere near the dream which woke him up.

“Upwards of 15 minutes. I did not want to rouse you from sleep. Though, I find the justice of being able to capture you in mere charcoal and paper to be doubtful,” mused Hannibal as Will felt his face grow hot once more.

“Keep on feeding my ego, doctor. You know what it’ll do,” snorted Will, unaware that he was still incessantly preening a curl on the side of his head.

“I’m rather curious to find out what it may do,” voiced Hannibal, in a tone of inquisitiveness.

“Keep at it and you just might find out,” shot back Will, with a smug smile slowly forming.

“But anyways, looks like I won’t be going to the café for a while. Unlike the Ripper to use the same location twice, but it makes you wonder where else he’s met his muse,”murmured Will, with a slight inflection toward the end of his sentence. His exploration of the office continued, as he waded over to the ladder underneath the bookshelf.

“Who do you suspect is his inspiration? And how do you suspect he’s selecting his canvases?” inquired Hannibal, taking amusement in Will’s walks around his office. He watched with a slight curiosity and covet, the dangerous glint inflected against his merlots. No, Hannibal never exactly indulged in hedonism but when a living, marbled statue walked past, he had little self restraint. And this was an opportunity. So his eyes wandered.

“So many questions, Doctor Lecter. All these books and none have proved to be insightful?” shot back Will, climbing atop the ladder, standing by the ledge and leaning his backside onto the wooden rails. His fleece had long been abandoned on Hannibal’s seat as it left to reveal

his plaid shirt, the cuffs being callowly rolled up his forearms. His hands were propped up against the rail, his elbows bending with slack.

“I read largely for leisure. Information of niche topics will often prove my books to be shortsighted.”

“What? Physics? You can’t read *this* for *leisure* ,” responded Will, letting out a small laugh as he plucked the hard covered book from the shelf.

The spine of the book crackled as Will flipped the cover open. Several sheets and ripped pages fell by his feet, strewn full of equations and formulas. A light hum of interest came from the profiler as he bent down to retrieve the papers, taking a particular interest to the yellowing of the page, lined and bordered with age.

“What are these?” muttered Will, as he flipped the pages over, the wrinkling of the page echoing in the office.

“Will, please. I must ask that you leave that book and the contents on the shelf,” spoke Hannibal with an inflection of slight urgency.

“You’re right, sorry, I shouldn’t have,” hastily reciprocated Will, guilt prickling at him, as he neatly organized the pile of papers between the cover and first page. Before closing the cover, his eyes slightly wandered to a block of words written in another language. There was one word which caught his eyes at the end of the sentence.

Mischa.

“I didn’t mean to um, impose on your personal belongings, I’m sorry,” apologized Will, as he unfolded the cuffs of his plaid button-down. Not wanting to come off brash or ill natured, he slowly came off the steps of the ladder, avoiding eyes and holding his breath.

“No need for apologies Will. Simply a mishap on my part, I had not expected you would look through my bookshelf,” said Hannibal, in a matter of factly tone, imparted with no hint of a lie.

“No, you shouldn’t have to tell me something like that, I’m sorry,” whispered Will, wishing he had been a little more adamant in admitting his guilt.

“Nevermind it. On the subject of the Ripper, what do you believe the summation of his clues lead to?” asked Hannibal, redirecting the course of the conversation, for he knew Will was quite stubborn when it came to his own resolve.

“Clues have been kind of fragmented, but the evidence points north of the right answer. The Ripper didn’t know the victim, only that they’ve wronged his muse somehow. He’s gotten bold with his last victim, showing it off in public, but his intention was for the specific person to see. His tableau design was pretty representative in itself, too, I would say,” trailed off Will, seemingly lost in the loop of the overwhelming clues the Ripper had left behind.

“It’s like the Ripper *wants* his muse to know that he’s the Ripper. They’ve met before, exchanged conversation, maybe even regularly,” scoffed Will, at the fantastical idea that the Ripper’s muse may interpret the tableaus with any meaning, or acceptance. Ironic though, as he did. *He did.*

“A-and the tableaus aren’t personal on behalf of the Ripper. Just to his inspiration,” hollowly said Will, as his breathing hitched narrowly.

Personal. I understood the last two tableaus.

“The location. The café,” whispered Will, with an inflection of a tremble in his words. His hands slinked out, trembling as it lassoed a pen and quickly peeked up at Hannibal for his notebook. As if on cue, Hannibal gave a nod, as Will jotted down his vortex of ideas.

“Meanings of the last two tableaus. *Make assumptions, take what isn’t yours.* It wasn’t jewelry, it was my scarf,” shakily perspired Will, as he drew a series of messy arrows and scrawled unfinished sentences across the page. His frenzied eyes darted from a free area of the page, filled up with his observations as the second hand crescendoed closer to the minute.

The drastic sound of the pen stretched and whipped across the page, enough to leave indents and tears came from Will as his eyebrows scrunched together. The ink tugged behind as it smudged underneath the ex-profiler’s pinky, until at last, the sound of a circle and the drop of a pen.

Loud enough to be heard throughout the room, the buzzing silence leaving Will to search the page for where he might’ve left out something, anything.

“Will, do you believe you may have a suspect for his muse?”

“It’s me.”

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal is dangerously close to being caught but his jokes are still his one salvation

Tracing in Vain

Chapter Notes

The chapter count is definitely not rigid and will most probably change.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I-It has to be a coincidence. Stuff like this just doesn't happen to me on purpose," whispered Will, his words coming out in a tremor, despite his attempt to enunciate.

Being unaware of his grip on Hannibal's pen, his knuckles were blanched with a forced white, his nails dug curves into the palms of his hands.

"Often, fate and circumstances lead us in circles. Disastrous, a thing such as fate is," spoke Hannibal, walking over to Will as he gently reminded Will of his grip.

Will blinked in surprise as he felt Hannibal's hand touch his, unwinding the way his fingers curled and balled into a fist. The psychiatrist's fingers gently pressed Will's hand, gently easing the nails which shoveled into the flesh of his palm, away.

"Being unlucky is my thing, it's been showing lately," replied Will, feeling his headache pounding. His lower lip trembled despite the way his teeth clamped onto it. The friction of teeth that graveled against it, sanding and reducing to blood and skin by habit now, not necessity.

"Recognition from an artist to his muse, does it not feel as if you've seen him personally?" asked Hannibal, with a looming sense of seriousness rather than curiosity, which had been leading up until now.

"Stop making me question my own morality, Hannibal. Not right now, I can't do this," croaked Will, with a choked sob lodging sourly in his throat.

"I have to go back there," continued Will, trying to clear the unbearable weight of his own guilt on his conscience. Perhaps he didn't answer Hannibal because the answer treaded the border of something immoral, too much even for himself to accept.

"Would you like company?" asked Hannibal, picking up the navy fleece left on the couch earlier by Will.

"Please," affirmatively nodded Will, his chin eagerly bobbing as he accepted the fleece back from Hannibal's stretched arm. He swiftly pulled the fleece on as he swallowed nervously, suddenly cognizant of the sore throat that was starting to prove to be more than an inconvenience. He hoped it wouldn't escalate to more than it was.

Will pulled open the door of the Bentley as he climbed into the passenger's seat, tapping his fingers against his thigh in worry. Frankly, he wasn't ready to go back, not that he might ever be ready to go back. Though the thought of having "A Hannibal" nearby made him feel at ease.

It was usually around a 20 minute walk to the café, but with the Bentley, it snapped to a couple of wandering thoughts and murmurs before they pulled to the crime scene. Will sighed as he hesitantly paused, sitting in the passenger seat. If he chose to do this, his nightmares would give him no chance at salvation.

"Will, are you certain about this? It won't be a long drive back," spoke Hannibal, turning to look at Will. Will's nervous tics only grew in strength and speed against the leather seat of the car.

"I-I'm fine," spoke Will with a fake declaration, his words trembling in hesitation. He adjusted his glasses as he let out a sigh, getting out of the car. He didn't walk over to the crime scene until Hannibal left the car as well, walking beside him.

"Will? You're back, and with someone. Professional advice?" asked Jack, turning towards Hannibal.

"Uh yeah, this is Dr. Lecter," introduced Will, nodding over to Hannibal. What he didn't admit was that Dr. Lecter was more than "professional advice." To him anyways.

"Dr. Lecter? Hannibal Lecter?" inquired Jack, stretching his hand towards Hannibal.

"Um, yeah, Hannibal. You know him?" asked Will, feeling somewhat lost.

"By word of mouth, yes. Dr. Bloom speaks highly of him,"answered Jack.

"I prefer it be known that we are contemporaries, performing at the same level," answered Hannibal as he accepted Jack's handshake.

"Dr. Bloom told me you were modest," continued Jack, scintillatingly obvious that he was curious about Hannibal. More than willing to divert his attention to Hannibal.

"Jack, I need crime scene photos. And another request. Stop leering at Dr. Lecter, if you would," said Will, tone thick with sass and contempt. Perhaps even a little of envy and covet.

Before Jack could reply, Will walked over to the forensic photographer, hands in pocket and taking long strides, pride oozing out of each step.

"Rather unceremonious of you, Will," whispered Hannibal, as he treaded behind Will. A twinkle in his eye and a sheen of amusement lingered, signaling that he enjoyed Will's agency.

"You think?" snorted Will, rolling his eyes.

"If it was your intention, then succeeded you have," mused Hannibal, with a small smile.

“Oh good,“ jested Will, with a grin as he tapped the manila folder he held and flipped open before. Inside contained the same victim profile information and scattered with photographs.

“I’ll need a copy of these,” muttered Will, carding through the several pages in the file.

Criminal records of petty crimes, such as theft and assault were written down in blocks at a time. There were several viable pictures of the crime scene and the corpse, mused Will as his fingers flickered between a few on the surface.

He promptly shut the file shut as he tucked it underneath his arm, lifting the caution tape to duck underneath it and away. He had all he needed, everything he needed to find the Ripper.

“Gotta go, Jack,” walked off Will as he lazily raised his arm that was free of the manila folder in a flaccid attempt at bidding a farewell.

Feeling Hannibal’s presence beside him, Will pulled open the door of the Bentley, feeling the stream of heat flow out. Slacking the tension in his shoulders, Will climbed into the seat, waiting for Hannibal by the other side. His fingers hesitated by the flaps of the folder, unsure if he really wanted to involve himself in this. Though he was already involved, no thanks to the Ripper.

“Thanks, Hannibal,” perspired Will, as he shut his eyes, leaning his head against the seat of the car.

“What for?”

“Basically everything.”

“I don’t believe you can owe it all to me,” replied Hannibal, starting the drive back to the office.

“Who knows where I might be if I didn’t owe it to you. Probably a morgue,” dryly laughed Will.

“Anyways, I didn’t see Beverly there. Do you know where she might be?” questioned Will, changing the subject to avoid the dread of awkward silence.

“I can only predict that she is either at home or visiting her partner,” said Hannibal, making the last left turn before the drive along the stretch.

“Oh that’s new. Never knew she had a partner,” replied Will, his eyebrows shooting up dubiously, though he knew Hannibal wasn’t one to lie.

“I have only seen her upwards of two or three times,” replied Hannibal, stopping the Bentley in front of the office.

“Have I seen her at any time when I stop by?” inquired Will, suddenly growing curious about the “personal” Beverly. She was usually personal and in the bounds beyond what Will needed to know, though she had never mentioned a girlfriend.

“No, nor have I, as of recently. It has been a stretch of time since I have seen her,” spoke Hannibal, almost ruefully.

“And what about you?” asked Will, swallowing nervously.

Hannibal gave a short tilt of his head before Will caught on, clarifying his query.

“Your girlfriend,” explained Will, before immediately cringing at his words. His fingers worked up the way to his curls, nervously tugging and straightening at it. It was something personal and Hannibal didn’t owe it to Will to answer.

But he wanted to know that the person who walked out of his office, the person he addressed as Doctor, wasn't his other.

That he wasn’t already spoken for.

“Is there someone specific you’re imagining?” questioned Hannibal, with an undeniable twinkle in his eye. The corners of his lips slightly curved as his eyes followed suit.

“Oh, no, I just-,” stammered Will, unsure of how to finish his thought.

“I was just curious,” replied Will, swallowing nervously again before nervously running his palms along his thighs, a habit he was never exactly conscious of performing.

“Might it make me horrible if I leave you curious?” asked Hannibal, still accompanied with his small smile.

“Yes, it would,” jested back Will, reciprocating Hannibal’s energy with a hidden dagger deep feeling of shame. He treaded along something personal, enough for Hannibal to want to obfuscate.

“I am currently uninvolved,” answered Hannibal, sliding his seatbelt back. He turned around to sneak a look at Will, seeing a pair of doe ceruleans blinking, a moment stunned.

“I see,” murmured Will, mirroring the same unbuckling and sliding back his seat belt, but with less grace. It zipped from the grip of his fingers before he was able to slide it back, promptly thudding against the interior of the car.

Will flinched at the sound, wincing as he let his hands drop. He let out a trembled sigh, one trying to suppress another cough. When that was successful, a sneeze rang in the car.

“Will, have you been getting proper rest? It seems that you may have caught a cold, though I suspect overexertion to be the culprit,” mused Hannibal.

“Yeah I guess. But it’ll pass,” said Will, suppressing a cough, his sniffling not helping his case.

Will suddenly felt a cool backhand being pressed onto his forehead, lifting his curls. A moment stunned, Will instinctively jerked back from the sudden touch before settling into it.

A bit like *Verutis,* Hannibal noted. Hannibal's cool backhand embalmed his forehead, which felt degrees too hot.

"You have a fever. It is unlikely to pass without proper rest and diet, Will. Stay," said Hannibal, with no room for an argument in his words.

"Okay," answered Will as he slumped back into the car seat, not putting up the fight he would have liked, for his exhaustion got the better of him.

"There are some belongings which I must gather from the office. It won't take long," said Hannibal as he stepped out of the car, with Will giving a short nod in return.

And it didn't take long; Hannibal was back within minutes, with a valise in his hand. As he opened the car door, the rush of the winter cold left Will to dig his chin into the cashmere scarf which knighted his neck.

In contrast, Hannibal's scarf laxly looped around his neck, with one end draped over his shoulder and the other over his chest. The buttons of his navy overcoat were spared, revealing his three piece suit.

The sound of the car door shutting echoed in the air for too long, as Will blinked out of his starring. It was something he had been doing plenty lately.

"A penny for your thoughts, Will?" asked Hannibal, weaved with light humor as he reached for the seatbelt, stretching it over his body.

"Save it, it'll do us both some good," sighed Will, giving a small smile as he eased.

"I have enough of it to spare."

"Money or time?"

"I would not be averse to indulgence once in a while," lightly replied Hannibal, with a tilt of his head and the curl of a corner of his lips. If words could shrug, Will was sure they would have.

"Rather unsure what to take that as, Dr. Lecter."

"I would have to confess to indulgence daily, then, for the sight of you sates."

"Don't practice your pick-up lines on me, Dr. Lecter," snorted Will as he rolled his eyes, feeling the efficacy of his scarf. Or maybe it wasn't the scarf, but the pink on his face was growing like ember that flickered and swelled.

Will let out a yawn as the minimal rocking motion of the car felt soothing rather than irritating. He dipped the side of his head onto the cool glass of the car as he sighed, unbothered that his glasses were digging onto the side of his face.

He felt safe in the car, and it was the last thought which burned a comforting permanence in his mind as his azure eyes shuttered closed.

—

“Will.”

Will managed to murmur a small reply, indicative of the fact that he woke up by Hannibal’s voice. The still languid Will rubbed his eyes as he felt his glasses peel off his face, already feeling an indent.

“You need proper rest. A car won’t do,” crooned Hannibal, undoing his seatbelt.

“Okay,” muttered Will in reply, as he unclipped his seatbelt, holding the seat belt until it was back, making sure it didn’t snap against the interior of the car again.

Nearly tripping over his own feet, the ditzy Will shut the car door as he exited the Bentley, following Hannibal inside his home, which he was somewhat familiar with now. The smell of cologne mixed with a blend of spices hung in the air, lightly swirling into a scent Will added to his schemas of comfort.

Shrugging off his fleece, Will awkwardly shuffled around, feeling like an uninvited guest treading an uninvited space.

“You haven’t had lunch, allow me time to prepare dinner,” spoke Hannibal as he hung his navy overcoat onto the coat hanger, along with his scarf.

The same went with his blazer as he unbuttoned them, leaving only his white button up. His tie went last, as it gracefully slipped off the side of his neck. His cuffs were rolled up to irregular levels, not held in place by buttons.

“If you would like Will, or rather, I suggest that you take this time to rest.”

“I think I’ve done enough of that in the car,” replied Will, suppressing a yawn that would have otherwise wrecked his argument.

“Will you be rendering my couch gratuitous?” lightly asked Hannibal. A black apron had been tied loosely around his waist, as he turned to the Will who was rocking on his heels in an attempt to keep himself busy.

“No, I guess not,” replied Will, shuffling towards and sitting down onto the couch, unaware that he would be sinking into the cushion. The sensation kneaded Will in every sore spot he had as he laxed the tension in his shoulders.

“On a second thought,” started Will as he gave a modest yawn already on the brink of another slumber.

—

Instead of waking up by Hannibal, Will woke up to the scent of chicken soup. He groggily rubbed his eyes as he released an exhaustive sigh, laden with a heavy feeling of satisfaction. The soup was simmering on the stovetop as the sound of plates being placed onto a tabletop brought Will’s attention to the dining room.

Easing himself off the couch, Will walked to the source of the sound, catching Hannibal in the dining room. Will stood by the doorway, peering into the kitchen and observed Hannibal. Still in his waist-tied apron and button up, the cook placed down a set of utensils and wine glasses.

A sudden flicker of the eyes haloed in sanguine flitted to the doorway, catching Will. A sheepish smile revealed itself onto Will's lips as he walked into the dining room, feeling a warm cinder at the familiarity.

"It smells good," noted Will, commenting on the smell of a deeply tender meat.

"I am often aware of the finer scents in life. And taste, though I am aware both are rather subjective. I do hope you find it palatable," hummed Hannibal, pouring a merlot wine red into each cup, glimmering like a sea of black rubies underneath the light. Wine was a luxury that Will hadn't had in a long time, though it was partially because he preferred whiskey to it.

"There's no need to question it, this isn't the first time I'll be having your cooking," scoffed Will, only wondering how long his food will last on the plate before it is engorged by him.

"You flatter me," said Hannibal, his eyes trussed with a mirth as he walked toward the doorway and into the kitchen.

"The truth tends to do that," reciprocated Will, taking a seat at the dining table. Almost immediately, Will's mouth drooled like Pavlov's dogs, in anticipation as the scent of the food floated throughout the room.

Hannibal came back into the kitchen with a bowl of what Will assumed to be the chicken soup. It was placed down beside Will's plate as Hannibal took his seat across Will.

Bingo.

"Thank you, Hannibal," sighed Will, as his eyes fluttered up to meet Hannibal's.

"Bon appétit."

Will picked up his spoon, eagerly bringing up the soup. It tasted like last time, flavors slowly painting his taste buds. A sigh of satisfaction escaped his lips as the brunette struggled to contain his smile, attempting to bury it with food.

"What's the cut?" asked Will, simultaneously curious.

"Lamb," answered Hannibal, offering nothing more than a small smile, which Will couldn't shake off as pride. He detected a bit of smugness, as he wasn't new to it for he indulged in it more than the average person.

"I will not ask what you think of the food, I presume that you find it sufficient," stated Hannibal, picking up his knife and slicing into his dinner.

“More than sufficient,” nodded Will, attempting to remain ceremonious while eating. It was delicious, and along with any other words he could not bother to think of at the moment.

“Gracious of you to bless me with such words,” said Hannibal, a smile laced with sarcasm.

“Oh, shut up,” managed Will in between chuckles. He was in rather high spirits, as food filled his mouth, wine coaxing his inhibitions to a low.

Switching for a change of texture, Will picked up his knife and cut into the ribs on his plate, seeing that the flesh fell right off the bone. The fat of the meat melted in his mouth, as the tenderness came as a surprise.

Dinner passed with spurs of conversation from both sides, not free of sarcastic remarks from Will nor clever returns from Hannibal. The last tip of the wine glass went as Will rubbed his eyes, stretching out as he gave a yawn before standing from his seat, bringing his dishes and utensils to the dishwasher.

A silent drizzle strewed the windows and air as Will peeked out the window momentarily, enjoying the serenity of rain. The sweet smell of petrichor was reminiscent of the summer rains in the South, where he lived with his dogs. A set of faint footsteps treaded closer to the kitchen as Hannibal walked in with his utensils neatly stacked on top of his plate as he slid it into the dishwasher.

“God, it’s already 10 PM,” sighed Will, seeing another of his days flying by. Not that he was getting any younger, but he wasn’t exactly getting anywhere.

“Like the adage reflects, time flies when you’re having fun, I suppose.”

Will huffed a laugh as in retrospect, he couldn’t deny it. It was fun, and more.

“Perhaps it is best that you take your rest now. As I say, the remedy of all things ill is simply rest,” lilted Hannibal.

“I think you’re right,” replied Will, his eyelids laden with a heavy lethargy, eyelashes shuttering.

“I presume you remember where the guest room is?”

“I do,” answered Will, giving a small nod before stopping by the doorway.

“Goodnight, Hannibal.”

Too nervous to wait to hear a reply in return, Will turned toward the direction of the guest room, where he stayed last time. As he twisted the knob to the door, walking in.

The same neatly finished duvet was unfolded on the bed, with a pair of pajama pants and a grey shirt lying on top of it. With the tag still on them, Will murmured a small ‘Oh,’ as he slipped the safety pin tag off, undressing himself to dress in the clothes Hannibal had provided.

As soon as Will had finished changing, he folded his glasses and placed them on top of his nightstand, slipping underneath the covers. He let the lullaby of nature sing him to sleep, nodding off to the sound of rain pattering against the pane.

—

A red stained his hands to a macabre sheen of black under the moonlight. Waves of blood crashed against the shore as the preemptive dye washed up to Will's ankles. For a moment, he stood, watching as the blood sun crawled to the horizon. A moth to a flame which he could not turn from.

It took not a second before Will found himself underneath the dense ocean, a gravity pulling him into the abyssal depths. His attempt at perspiring cries fell in vain.

Will scrambled to get a hold of his blanket, flipping over the weight anchored to his body. His clammy hands groped for the doorknob, the darkness catalyzing his anxiety. His breathing hastened erratically and exhaled with only a tremble. Tears sprung to his glassy eyes, brimming like a bowstring tightened far beyond its extent.

A figure in the shadow appeared by the door, which only fueled Will's urge to scream, though nothing came to fruition of it. Trying to push past the figure by the door, Will only stopped when he heard his name, collapsing into the nearest structure.

"Will, you are safe. It is 2:14 AM and you are in Baltimore, Maryland," repeated Hannibal as he attempted to walk Will back to his bed.

Will felt fingers carding through the damp curls which stuck to his forehead, another arm stabilizing him by the waist. He leaned into the touch, not by instinct, but because he knew who it was. His arms urgently wrapped around Hannibal's.

Will's shirt hugged to his body, slick in sweat, sourced from his nightmares. But he didn't have the courtesy to think about letting go. He held on, arms tightening around Hannibal's waist, trying to keep the silk between his fingers.

"Don't go."

"Everywhere else is lackluster."

—

The morning sun peeked through, seeing morning dew adorn the window with iridescent droplets. Will groaned as he sat up in his bed, looking around. His hand was being held by Hannibal's.

"What?" murmured Will, suddenly feeling a vermillion watercolor blush blotch his cheeks. Not that he let go.

The psychiatrist who sat next to him blinked awake, his voice ringing deeply.

"Good morning, Will."

At last, Will shyly slinked his hand away, returning a “Good morning.”

“Last night is still a little disorientating and I can’t remember everything, but I’m sorry,” sighed Will, reaching for his glasses by the nightstand.

“I am undeserving of an apology, especially when you do not owe one to me,” spoke Hannibal as he stood from the chair he had slept on all night.

Will swallowed in guilt as he flipped the duvet cover over, shuffling around in his socks. A quick look at the digital clock by the nightstand told Will it was already 9 AM, later than Hannibal’s usual schedule. As Hannibal left the room, Will reached into the closet for his clothes, dressing them onto his body.

The still groggy brunette traced Hannibal’s footsteps to the kitchen, where the psychiatrist had started a pot of coffee. It was the smell he missed; he missed the way the coffee bitterly coated his tongue.

The scent of eggs adorned the room as Will watched in awe of the man by the stove, the same loosely tied apron at his waist. The scent of chives, butter and cream followed, culminating to a rich and rustic breakfast.

“Protein scramble, to start your morning.”

“It looks good,” eagerly nodded Will, stabbing his fork into the breakfast. And not that he expected any different, the food tasted better than he could describe with words.

“Looks good, tastes even better,” murmured Will, washing his breakfast down with coffee.

Flashing a brief smile, Hannibal had moved onto cleaning up his cookware and retreated into his bedroom, most likely to get dressed. As quick as Will, Hannibal came out of his room with a three piece suit, this time with a light blue blazer. Only it looked like he didn’t have time for his hair, as a few ashy locks swept over his eyes.

—

The drive back to Hannibal’s office felt too short, as Will felt too embarrassed most of the ride to exchange a conversation. It was probably for the better that Hannibal hadn’t reminded Will of what happened either, knowing he would never forgive himself for it.

“I think I’m going to go, there’s something I need to do,” quickly added Will, offering another lopsided smile as he shuffled his shoes onto the ground. The snow had melted enough for his shoes to drag along the concrete, rubber awkwardly shifting back and forth, stirring the gravel.

“Until next time then,” lilted Hannibal, short of a whisper, just discernible enough for Will to hear.

“I won’t be long,” nodded Will, meaning exactly the words he articulated. He was going to use his “Hannibal privileges” to the extent.

Will turned away as his grip on the folder tightened infinitesimally. The only place he knew with access to technology was the library, which was where he was trekking to. The route to the library was a rather long walk, though straightforward.

The mornings Will wasn't visiting and witnessing Beverly-Banter, he walked around the neighborhood, looking for noteworthy places and memorizing the directions there. The library was one he hadn't expected to find, but a surprise on occasion wasn't bad.

The first time he walked into the library, he had on his old jacket and a flimsy pair of gloves, string fraying at the ends which were messily tugged together. The worst they could say was no and deny his entry, so Will had adjusted his glasses before shuffling inside, avoiding any eye contact.

Fortune, a mistress of timing, had decided to visit Will, rendering his version of "the worst" gratuitous. Nobody gave him trouble and he would lounge by a seat, fingers tracing the borders of a page moments before flipping. As soon as he settled, he integrated it into his daily routine. A place of shelter, but comfort more than that.

The walk in winter was always only a task Will had to complete, and never felt like leisure. Today out of all, Will quickened his pace until his calves felt sore, knowing the visage of the Ripper was only behind a wade of fog. Soon no longer would that be the truth, though his penchant for seeing the Ripper in the mirror was unhelpful. The thought of his nightmares made Will shake his head, before momentarily looking up to make out the library in the distance.

Peering into the glass door, he made out the librarian behind the desk. He was there, strangely enough, sitting down. Will pulled open the door as the immediate rush of warm air caused his hair to flay back here and there.

"Hey Will, long time no see!" spoke the librarian, who tapped at the keyboard by the desk. He had on black rectangular framed glasses (which Will was sure was fake) with a gray sweater over his brown plaid button up. A black lanyard strung around his neck, housing an ID and sets of keys.

"Jimmy, your outfit doesn't help your age," sighed Will as he let out a short laugh.

"I feel the part," shrugged Jimmy as he squinted in his rectangular framed glasses at the screen.

"I, um, need your help with something," whispered Will, leaning over the counter as far as it would allow.

"Happy to, what do you need help with?" whispered back Jimmy, leaning in as Will did.

"I need access to a computer. Books won't do it this time," replied Will, leaning back as he pushed off from the wooden counter. His eyes fell on the box of orange golf pencils as he swiped a few, hiding them into his pocket.

“I can do that, any in mind? Near the window? Near the bookshelves? Near the corner? In the corner?” cited Jimmy as he came from behind the counter.

“I guess in the corner,” murmured Will, really showing no preference for any spot.

“In the corner? What are you going to be looking at?” suggestively asked Jimmy accompanied with a grin.

“Nothing much,” muttered Will, not catching onto the librarian’s joke.

“Public decency, Will. Have the decency to invite me, I mean,” corrected Jimmy with a tilt of his head as he led Will to a corner computer.

“Oh, I-I’m not here for that,” replied Will, momentarily in shock. The joke took a while to settle before as it was the last thing he had expected.

“Right,” absentmindedly annunciated Jimmy as he unfolded his (gratuitous) rectangular glasses, placing them back onto the bridge of his nose.

After barely any time, an unnecessarily loud tap of the ‘enter’ clicked in the air, before Jimmy pushed the mouse over to Will.

“Have fun, don’t forget,” waved Jimmy accompanied by a suggestive motion of his hands.

“Prepare to be disappointed then,” said Will, rolling his eyes.

The profiler placed down the manila folder with sigh as his fingers pushed into the keys and the buttons on the mouse. TattleCrime.

Will could admit that TattleCrime wasn’t the best source for information, but none provided as much detail. He dragged himself a wooden chair as the page pulled up onto the screen.

Tacky headlines flashed across the white background as Will suppressed an eye roll, his predictions for the website not straying from his already low expectations. Exclamation marks were largely overused, next to the colon.

The articles were sectioned off by specifics, making it easy enough to find the category dedicated to the Ripper. No longer surprised by the lengths and dedications of news anchors, his cursor hovered over the myriad of recent articles, seeing that the latest one was of Miss Grethe. The crime scene for the most recent Ripper tableau was from this morning, and was expectantly missing from the set of articles.

It wouldn’t hurt to see the insight offered by TattleCrime for the most recent Ripper case, supposed Will as his eyes scanned over blocks of text detailing the crime scene. Unblurred pictures of the body and crime scene plastered across the page. If Will wasn’t a previous forensic professor and profiler, he would have cringed at the lurid presentation by TattleCrime. Though, the same couldn’t be said for the Ripper.

The Chesapeake Ripper was no stranger to the macabre, and it seems to the arts, similarly. His messages a paint stretched across the skin of his canvas, a medium for his muse.

Recognition.

A frown had manifested itself onto Will's eyebrows as the words on the screen blurred into a fog. He paid no attention to the screen nor the pictures. A sudden liveliness came to Will's fingers as they flickered between the pages of his folder. Moving to and fro the photographs, his eyes locked onto one. Conspicuous and set indiscriminately in the pile, this was the one which caught his attention.

The picture of the corpse, only with specifics. The flame pattern was vaguely nebulous, though he could recall isolated pieces of it at a time.

It was strangely familiar, in the way it shouldn't have been. In the way nobody should have seen it. In the way he should have never seen it.

Graphite and hatching.

Shattered like glass, fragments illuminated in sets of time, as Will shakily murmured a "no," trembling as he struggled to grip onto the pencil in his pocket. He took papers off of the tray by the printer as he jotted the summation of his notes onto them.

Sharp scritches from the pencil drew onto the page, angling the pencil tip as graphite dust flurried across the page.

How? How could Hannibal have known to draw it? It was an exact replica of the tableau, no information was published.

A strong urge to abandon everything he had found up till now knotted in his stomach. Will slumped back into his chair, letting the pencil in his hand fall onto the floor, echoing a hollow sound throughout the library.

He bothered not to pick it up. His grip loosened in exhaustion. His glasses suddenly felt tons heavier, his hat felt constrictive for the way he could feel his own pulse drumming on the sides of his temples. His scarf felt astringent, as it must've snaked and tightened around his neck, responsible for the way he struggled to breathe.

Bringing up a trembling hand up to his face, Will jerked the glasses off his face onto the table, uncaring of the sound it made, nor the damage his glasses would take.

It was the way an artist followed his muse. An artist by their muse's behest draws; a musician by their muse's behest composes. His artist had a keen eye for the macabre, a love for dissonance in composition which when layered proved to have been deliberate.

A sense of urgency for the truth swelled and surged in Will, causing him to erupt from his chair, fumbling for his glasses and paper.

It couldn't be, it wasn't.

Chapter End Notes

Lol the irony of no thanks to the ripper and he thanks the ripper in the next line

That was unintentional but thought it was funny as I reread it

From the Anchor to Which it Was Tied

Chapter Notes

Welcome to the last chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A moth which chases the flame is foolish for the way it meets its demise. Even in light of consequences, they are often magnetized to it. Hypnotically. Beyond their instinct to avoid death.

—

Will let out a drawled breath, wedging his palm onto his eyes, tangling his fingers into his hair. He forced the glasses back onto his face, shoving the papers into his pocket as he rushed out the library.

The urge to ignore the evidence and his intuition pricked like a thorn all over. His lungs filled and burned with the frostbitten air as he took up running. He needed to revisit the crime scene. He would recheck for everything he missed, anything.

The streets stretched out too long, for it seemed the distance grew everytime Will felt he was close. Stings of pain shot up Will's heels as he ran, uncaring. As soon as the familiar yellow of the crime scene came into view, Will slowed, urgently climbing underneath the tape.

"Will, you're back. For the third time. I suppose this means you have a lead?" asked the head of the behavioral science unit.

"Don't let Freddie Lounds get to this, block off every *single* reporter and journalist. I want a 50 feet radius from this location blocked away from the public," wheezed Will, trying to catch his breath.

Jack turned to someone beside him as he said "Do it."

"I assume you know what you're doing?" asked Jack as he turned back to Will, walking over towards the man attempting to stabilize himself on his knees.

"You should. If memories serve you correctly and if assumptions serve me correctly, there's a reason you're allowing me here," spat Will, with a brewing contempt.

"So what do you know?" asked Jack, ignoring the latter comments.

"I need to confirm a suspect. And if their source is TattleCrimes, then it rules them out," sighed Will.

“You have a suspect before a working profile? Who is it?” asked Jack, with a slight inflection to his second question.

“Can’t tell you until it’s confirmed,” answered Will, as he walked away, finding himself observing the body.

“You’re intentionally withholding information from the investigation, Will. Tell me the preliminary suspect.”

“What are you going to do? Arrest me? Come to think of it, I am looking for a place to stay,” replied Will, his mouth inhabiting a smile dripping with smug and sass.

“Catching the Ripper has been of a top priority since he’s marked his third victim and left with trophies. He’s been displaying tableaus more than ever, and I would be a fool to lose this lead. It’s important that you tell me,” pointedly replied Jack, with a tone of impatience, biting back ire.

“No,” simply replied Will, as he moved closer to examine the corpse, hung by the sign of the café.

The profiler heard a gruff grunt come from Jack as he felt some kind of pride knowing that he was able to get away with backtalk and more.

Will took a sharp notice to the surgical level needed for the tableaus. An artist not only needed vision, but skill. This artist had both. A pain dulled in his skull as he felt a languorous recreation bode. Immediately, Will shook his head in an attempt to clear his mind from it. He didn’t need to replicate the scene of the Ripper.

There was a form of intimacy through understanding that he didn’t want to acknowledge. Though it was rather late for that, as he was sure he wasn’t far from intimate with Hannibal.

A heavy feeling of betrayal suddenly stung Will as he bit back a choke. If he was right, the person who held his hand through a sleepless night, provided shelter and food, comfort, was also a serial killer.

“You’d be wise to keep this place sectioned off,” murmured Will, as he turned to walk away from the scene.

“Where are you leaving to?”

“Wherever I feel like,” shrugged Will as he gave an exaggerated yawn.

Without waiting for a response, Will slipped underneath the tape, leaving to the alleyway. It was approaching evening, the time where the ebbing sun slowly set, in replacement of the moon.

Today was another day he pushed back the responsibility of looking for a job. Or rather, locating the job. Giving an annoyed grunt, Will sighed at the extra set of responsibilities he was burdened with, no thanks to the Ripper. And if he was correct, it would mean no thanks to Hannibal.

A lump of confusion knotted in Will's throat as he swallowed it back, pushing down the uneasy feeling in his stomach. He bit back a tremulous sigh, afraid that if it didn't, it would lead to much more. His hands shook in his pockets, quivering in exhaustion and overwhelm.

Will stuck his hands back into his pocket, resting on top of the cards in his left pocket, one being Hannibal's business card and the other still remaining an enigma, but nothing short of a trifle.

—

He walked back with the intention of stopping underneath his tent, though he found himself in front of Hannibal's door. Will took to swallowing his nerves and feelings; most of all, his yearning for the truth. The bonfire for flamechasers.

Two raps to the burgundy wood door was enough for a soft 'click' from the lock, as Hannibal opened the door to his office, standing just on the other side.

"Will, a pleasurable surprise. Please, come inside," said Hannibal, as he gestured Will inside.

"Right," croaked Will, as his voice slipped through his parted lips, barely audible and only carrying air.

"Is there a reason for your visit? Or am I lucky to have your company today?" asked Hannibal as he lightly gestured Will to sit by the seat in front of him.

"No," emanated Will, his voice in a tremble. The brunette ignored Hannibal's gesture as he wandered around the psychiatrist's office, choosing to settle on his desk. He twined his hands loosely together as he trained his eyes back onto the bookshelf.

"Then might I suggest a nightcap?"

"Alright," accepted Will, biting his chapped lip, walking over to the seat by the fireplace.

Hannibal stood to retrieve a bottle of wine and two glasses as he poured the garnet drink into them, handing one over to Will.

"Thanks," muttered Will, taking seat by the flame which flickered back and forth, licking the space around it and enrapturing without warning. Such is the case for those who were attracted to its glow.

"The pleasure is mine," crooned Hannibal as he took the seat across Will.

"I went back to the crime scene. I had to confirm my profile," said Will, absentmindedly fidgeting with the glass of wine in his hands.

"And your profile details?" asked Hannibal. The fireplace gave his eyes an orange halo and his cheeks a warm accentuation. The sound of rain pattered against the window.

"The Ripper was a surgeon, demonstrated by his aptitude for making cuts which require more than preliminary knowledge of the human anatomy. He has a keen eye for the arts. Refines

his skills through practice," said Will, as he gave a snort at the last addition.

"And demographic wise, who would fit the Ripper?" asked Hannibal, his eyes twinkling in amusement. This made Will's mouth involuntarily twitch at the corners, some in anger and some in annoyance.

"The Ripper most likely qualifies for the senile age," said Will as his lips drew up in a smile at Hannibal's reaction. Hannibal's jaw clenched menially from anger, though he maintained a peace.

"Say, how old are you, Dr. Lecter?" asked Will, his voice in a sneer.

"Fourty-six," replied Hannibal, taking a short sip of his wine as his eyes stayed trained on Will.

"Then the profile likely suggests that the Ripper falls in his mid to late fourties," hummed Will, canting his head to provide the comment in a feigned innocence, fringing on naivety. He took a triumphant sip of his wine, flashing his doe eyes at Hannibal.

"Let's see," hummed Will, searching for some false addendum to his profile. His capacity for pushing buttons was not often deployed, not to say it should be undermined.

"I'd say his vision was exceptional. Execution could've been better. He was likely not a very good surgeon, so he switched jobs. But the current occupation is probably in the same field. Doctor, nurse, pharmacist, psychiatrist maybe," rattled off Will as he took a sip of his wine, hiding his growing smile.

"And from what basis, Will? Those are very stretching conclusions," asked Hannibal, tone neutral.

"From evidence. And thinking retrospectively, from experience. The Chesapeake Ripper wasn't my first rodeo. I'm not impressed," said Will, suspiring a sigh in deep sarcasm and embellishment.

"I see," tautly replied Hannibal, giving no further insight.

"Any suggestions to gentrify my profile, Dr. Lecter? Is it a bingo yet?" impishly asked Will, dipping his toes into the testing waters.

"I cannot attest to it. I'm afraid I do not have the gathered facts to formulate a sound conclusion."

"So much for psychiatry, huh."

"Often it is profiling that requires psychiatry and not the other way," smoothly replied Hannibal, his voice a velvet glaze.

"I guess," dismissively responded Will, using his free hand to clamp back his hair before easing his glasses free from his face.

A heavy cloud that rained betrayal fogged Will's face as it reflected in his brooding eyelids. He swallowed yet another urge to blurt his confrontation, knowing it would come weak and haggard.

"Have you been pursuing anything novel of recent, Will?" asked Hannibal, a switch in topic and attempt to continue the train of conversation.

"The Ripper's been eating my attention. So no, I guess not," replied Will. He redirected their train of subject, stubbornly leading it back on his track.

"Do you mind that he occupies?"

"Yes," answered Will, with some form of sincerity. He didn't mind it when Hannibal occupied his mind. He invited it, albeit shyly. It was different with the Chesapeake Ripper. He reminded Will of fraying trust and something he wish he could deny.

"You were looped into this involuntarily, I suppose," lightly replied Hannibal.

"And I've been waiting for him to pull me out of it. A no show I guess. An artist who promises to paint his muse ditches."

"Where do you believe the artist leaves to? If he has anywhere his muse is not?"

"For something grandeur."

"I see it differently," mused Hannibal, eyes flickering up to catch Will's.

"How would you know?" asked Will as he barked a bitter laugh. He wanted an answer that he knew he wasn't going to receive.

"The line between you and the Ripper has begun to blur," replied Hannibal, seemingly avoiding Will's question.

"No, he's crossed it."

"Has this only come from after concluding your profile?"

"No, a profile wasn't enough," wistfully said Will, in a low tone that almost amounted to a whisper. He placed down his empty glass as the younger man took to walking around the office. He made it look like a whim of wandering curiosity, but he was nearing the bookshelf.

"Identity, then?" asked Hannibal, as his eyes travelled to Will.

Will gave no answer as he waded to the desk of drawings once again. Only this time there was a notebook of hastened lines, stretching with urgency across the flipped page.

Furrowing his eyebrows, Will picked up the notebook, observing the page it was opened to. Equations and shorthand texts in another language Will couldn't understand. Flipping to the next page, Will found it empty. With the exception of indented marks from the previous page.

“What’s this?” asked Will in thought, walking over back to the fireplace.

“Failed attempts at understanding principle,” replied Hannibal, after a stretched moment of silence. His eyes averted Will’s pointed gaze.

“What principle? Didn’t take you to be metaphysical,” prodded Will, with a hint of sincerity.

“Time,” replied Hannibal, with reluctance weaved into his voice and guilt varnishing his eyes like mosaic.

“What about it?”

“Reversal.”

“Surely it’s not because you regret, Dr. Lecter, is it?” asked Will, brought aback by the answer. It was short, but that was all Hannibal needed to say.

“My capacity for regret is often deeper than I can see.”

A tension laced the air, threatening to fray. It would snap with the weight of a confession or a confrontation.

“I can’t say I see it either.”

Hannibal said nothing in return. He swirled the remaining of the merlot wine in his glass, hesitating for a sip.

It was rather bold and presumptuous, but Will flipped through the notebook in his hands, swallowing as he saw the repeat of the same pen and frantic movement by the ink. Will flipped the notebook closed, getting up to walk to the small coffee table. He placed the book back down.

“I’m sorry,” whispered Will. He didn’t exactly know what he was apologizing for and if it was preemptive or not, but he did anyways.

“Have you done something to warrant an apology?” asked Hannibal.

“Feels like it. And if not, then it will,” whispered Will, walking back to the fireplace. He needn’t reconfirm the sketches Hannibal drew. He was afraid of seeing them again and knowing that he was right.

“Nothing you have done has warranted one. What could you do that would?”

It was Will’s turn to stay quiet. It was both because he had everything to say and nothing at all. The wrath of a tidal wave was destructive and unlikely to be held back by a dam.

“I-I don’t know,” sighed Will, at last.

Hannibal stood up to retrieve the unfinished bottle of wine, walking back to the fireplace to pour more of the liquid into the glasses. Will handed the glass to Hannibal, holding it by the

bottom to avoid any contact of their fingers.

“An apology by habit, then?” asked Hannibal, handing the glass back to Will.

“No. Of guilt.”

“And what are you guilty of?”

“Betraying ethics. Betraying someone and with that, betraying myself,” spoke Will. His words were rigid, despite the rueful don.

“A betrayal of ethics is following moral. That is not a wrong to count,” said Hannibal, nearly in a lilt. His eyes flickered up here and there, only to catch Will’s slight inflections. The draw of a breath, a short clench of his jaw, a stitch of his eyebrows.

“It feels wrong, and it *is* wrong,” said Will, his voice coming out in a break.

“What is?” asked Hannibal, placing down his glass of wine. His eyelids shuttered slowly, swishing his pupils by Will.

“You.”

There was nothing in return.

“It’s you, isn’t it. The Ripper,” whispered Will. It was the most he could amount to. His voice came out in a tremor, weaker than he would’ve liked it to have sound. He wished it came out in the rage that burned his throat and fogged his eyes.

“Yes.”

The confession was one word, and the means to it only took one question.

“Why me?” It was a simple matter but held a great weight in Will’s mind.

“Why not you?”

“No, why did it have to be me?” asked Will, as he let silent tears slide down his lagoon eyes, painting his face with streaks.

“It didn’t but it couldn’t have been anyone else,” replied Hannibal.

“You’re lying, it *should’ve* been someone else!” shouted Will, erupting up from his chair.

“Will,” started Hannibal, as he stood up.

“No, don’t!” yelled Will, as he used his backhand to rid of the tears that caught on his eyelashes. He struggled towards the door as his tears clouded his eyes. He jerked open the latch, running outside, despite the pouring rain.

Will wheezed, gathering the bitter air in his lungs as he perspired them in tears. His heart rushed too fast. It was like the word was a concentrated bronze bullet, occupying just one of

a revolver's chamber. That was all it took.

Will stumbled to and fro the street, palming the brick walls to stabilize himself. He traced the slit between the clay stones, walking back to the place he felt familiar.

The alleyway between the buildings was narrow, but stretched for a distance. And that was what Will liked; the path rarely attracted visitors and on occasions, it would be Will holding *Verutis* for no particular reason other than wanting to. He enjoyed the way the black fur tickled his face and flooded his arms.

Will sighed a breath that came with a cry, souring his throat and revarnishing his face with tears. He leaned against the walls for support as he waded into the alley, disoriented. He tired of crying, it was exhausting, but strangely liberating.

The flame had long been extinguished.

Will stopped by his tent, seeing the cat lazily drawled in sleep, waiting for his presence now by the same time daily, it seemed. He squatted, bending down to run his fingers through the midnight fur. A pair of ears perked up, emerald eyes widening to the touch before familiarity set in. He gathered the bundle of warmth in his arms, shutting his eyes to let the last of translucent tears veil his face.

"I see you've met her."

Hannibal's voice harped the air. It was soft but reached depths.

"Her?"

Will eased open his eyes, with a few more drops of tears following as he looked up at the man. He left with just a button up shirt despite the night's absence of apricity. It was getting damper by the second, in addition to his hair. It was now wet and no longer swept back.

"*Verutis*. It means *'small beast'* in Lithuanian."

The cat purred in Will's arms at the sight of her owner. Her jaded eyes blinked awake and her tailed flickered at the sight of Hannibal. Will found himself holding onto Verutis a little tighter.

"She's yours? Then—," cut off Will. He drew in a quick breath of surprise, fumbling for the end of his scarf. He switched to holding Verutis by the dark plumes from her mane.

"This was you too," whispered Will, tracing over the strands of embroidery done onto the end of the scarf.

"This was the first place we met, though I stretch the usage of 'we.' You were asleep," answered Hannibal, his eyes searching to meet Will's. They swam in the lagoon water of his eyes.

"It's always you," murmured Will, burying his face into the jet black fur that donned Verutis.

“It that often horrible?” asked Hannibal, squatting to meet Will’s position, who was sitting underneath his tent.

“It’s hell.”

“I maintain that hell is the suffering of being unable to love.”

“It’s wrong. I can’t love The Ripper,” said Will. He couldn’t, but he wanted to.

“I can’t love you,” perspired Will, in a short breath. Saying it out loud felt unbearable and heavy. It lingered like a bad taste in his mouth. Because it was a lie.

“But I do,” whispered Will.

For the first time since the exchange began, Will looked up at Hannibal. His eyes searched the ever so often maroon ones, for something to return his own confession. Will found himself mindlessly stroking and keeping the black fur in between his fingers, as he waited for the stretched silence to go.

No answer came from Hannibal, but a touch from his hands grounded Will. He felt Hannibal’s thumb gently swipe by his cheekbone and travel to underneath his eyes.

“Oh, Will,” murmured Hannibal, delicately wiping away at the pearl of tears that gathered in the corner of his eyes.

The usual shifty azures widened to meet the ones in front of him. His eyes were especially aspectabund to the telling truth. Will stayed like that and allowed Hannibal’s hands to caress his face.

He could feel the rain, bouncing off the concrete and dripping from Hannibal’s arm. Winter rain was colder than snow, but Will couldn’t feel it.

Hannibal’s eyes stayed searching in Will’s for sometime, before retreating his hand.

“Should we resume our nightcap?”

Will hesitated for a second, shuffling his shoes on top of each other.

“You may bring Verutis inside if you wish,”added Hannibal.

Will swallowed, nodding before he stood up, the black cat still gathered in his arms. He followed Hannibal back into his home, where the fireplace expelled warmth. The moth would never learn.

Will stood awkwardly in the office, hair dripping with rain. He occupied himself with the cat in his arms, anxiously running his fingers through her fur, which clumped together in some patches by the rain.

Hannibal came back to the living room with a towel. He carded through Will’s wet hair with the towel, as well as accompanied by cafunes. The older man gently stirred the head of curls

with the towel, disregarding his own need to switch into dry and clean clothing.

“I can do this, go change,” said Will, placing his palm on top of his head, stopping the riffling motion by the towel.

Hannibal nodded, showing a little hesitation which he bit back as he nodded. Will took seat in the chair he was in previously, freeing Verutis onto his lap. The cat gave a generous yawn, before curling up, stationing itself on Will’s lap. It seemed even a cat was no less strangely charmed by the warmth and glow of a flame.

Hannibal came back to the kitchen with a similar towel in hand, drying his hair. He changed to a loose black shirt and was a pair of grey sweatpants, cinched loosely by his hip, which Will never thought he’d see. It was always either sleepwear or a three piece suit, sometimes minus the blazer.

“You wanted to continue.”

“And I take it you wish the same?”

“I do, I want the truth. And Verutis was the selling point,” murmured Will.

“Where do I begin?” said Hannibal, as he retrieved his wine glass from the table.

“I want to know why. Why did you do it?”

“You have given me the reason several times. It seems you have asked yourself the very same question. And answered it,” replied Hannibal, leaving the towel draped over his shoulder. His eyes never strayed from Will.

“They all wronged me in some way. And to think I thought the Ripper had been creating tableaus for himself,” said Will, with the exhale of a breath.

“I had no doubt you would find out, though I wish it were the way I envisioned it to play. Surprise on occasion should be expected, I suppose. Though learning of your feelings was a rather generous surprise,” answered Hannibal.

“You wanted me to find out? How?” asked Will, eyes drawing up in surprise. The foresight of the man sitting in front of him was sometimes left him incredulous. He’s ignored the latter comments made. It was true, but he decided to put it off until it was necessary to bring up.

“That would be another topic of discussion for perhaps another day,” answered Hannibal, tilting the glass to allow the nectar down his throat.

“Another day, you promised.”

“I promise.“

“And about what I said,” sheepishly mentioned Will, as he vacantly preened a curl on his head. It was getting harder to ignore the elephant in the room, poised right in front of Will.

“I-I don’t know what came over me when I said it,” blurted out Will.

A flash of hurt washed up on Hannibal’s face. His visage reflected immediate disappointment.

“But I meant it,” said Will, rendering Hannibal’s emotions transient. The brunettes eyes bounced around the floor to the cat in his lap, afraid to meet Hannibal’s eyes after his confirmation.

“Will,” spoke Hannibal.

Will’s eyes shot toward the direction of Hannibal’s voice as he looked up, seeing that he had gotten up from his seat. Will blinked in surprise before registering.

“Are you afraid?” asked Hannibal who lowered himself to Will’s seating position as his palm made its way to Will’s cheek again. It was warm and comforting.

“No, I-I’m not,” said Will, nervously swallowing. He found his heart rabbiting at the proximity between him and Hannibal. The younger man tried to croak something else before his eyes widened in surprise.

Hannibal gently eased Will into a kiss, their lips brushing minimally at first. Granting permission, Will nervously shut his eyes before leaning into it. He let Hannibal do the guiding, as he never had much opportunity to learn how a kiss was to properly be done.

Will felt his breathing hitch as Hannibal traced his thumb past his cheekbones and to his nape, intensifying their exchange. The younger man invited it, draping his arm over Hannibal’s shoulders.

The kiss stole air between them and left the both of them at each other’s lips supplicating for more. The extension of the kiss turned to something more than the chaste thought, teetering on the precipice of a flooding lust.

Will pulled away before it came of anything more. Both parties were left weakly gasping for air by the end of it.

“You’re shivering, Will. Perhaps a consequence of the rain,” crooned Hannibal, gently tracing Will’s jawline with his thumb before retreating his hand back.

Will offered a noise of thought that he wasn’t able to formulate into words. He wasn’t cold and he wasn’t shivering from the rain. He shivered from the affection of the kiss because it was genuine.

“It may be prudent for you to change into a dry set of clothing.”

Hannibal left the office and walked to his private work retreat, leaving Will to recuperate. It was namely hard for him to comprehend the gesture, but he found himself wishing that it had lasted longer.

“It’s getting late,” said Hannibal, as he came back into the office, handing Will a stack of clothing that were neatly folded.

“Thank you,” murmured Will, unzipping his fleece and sniffled. Maybe he was cold, but the cold and shivering were likely unrelated, to him at least.

“A-are you going to stand there?” asked Will as he started fumbling for the buttons on his shirt.

“I was going to inquire why you were not seeking the bathroom to change.”

“I’ll wake Verutis, she’s asleep,” said Will, genuinely. It seemed that it was the same with his dogs. If he moved while his dogs were in his lap, he would wake them and feel horrible about it.

“Would you like me to leave?”

“I think so,” muttered Will, although it wasn’t unlike Hannibal hadn’t seen him shirtless. Dressing his wounds required that at the very least. But they weren’t quite there yet.

Hannibal gave a small nod as he went back to his private retreat. The brunette slid the fleece off his shoulders and undid the remaining buttons before stripping it off. He pulled Hannibal’s undershirt over his head, minimizing any form of movement. He sighed a look at the sweatpants and the cat, knowing which one he would have to give up tonight.

“Hannibal?”

A familiar ‘click’ of the lock sounded the room as Hannibal came out. Will left the pair of sweatpants by the nearby table, running his hand on the sleeping cat.

“Will, she will awake eventually.”

“Worth it.”

“Then I suppose you will stay the night?” asked Hannibal.

“If you’re offering,” accepted Will, as he looked up.

“It is always up on the table, it is never necessary to question,” affirmed Hannibal, as he gave a small yet charming exuding smile.

“Okay,” nodded Will, shifting back to make himself more comfortable in the chair.

“You will sleep in the guest room,” chided Hannibal.

“I’ll just carry her in there then,” replied Will, a little annoyed as he gathered the furball in his arms.

“Spare the sheets, Will,” sighed Hannibal.

“I don’t keep my promises,” replied Will, giving a smug smile.

As Will stopped in front of the guest room, he turned to the office, where Hannibal was ready to extinguish the flame of the night, in replacement for the morning sun.

“Join me?” asked Will, who rocked on his heels. He didn’t quite understand what came over him, but it was what he wanted. He couldn’t understand his own boldness, he supposed.

“Of course,” replied Hannibal, as he finished the flame of the fireplace. The moth flew and found direction, no longer singularly attracted to a flame, but learned to chase a light.

As soon as Will walked into the guest room, he sighed with relief at the warmth of the room. He shucked off his socks, muttering a phrase of surprise at the heated floor. Will gently placed the black cat on the floor by the foot of the bed before he flipped the duvet cover off the bed.

He slipped into the bed, before finding it more uncomfortable than he thought it would’ve been to sleep in jeans. Will slid out of them, folding them and putting them up by the nightstand. He knew it was probably bad mannered to sleep in his boxers when invited to stay the night by somebody but he didn’t think too much of it. It wasn’t like the kiss was only chaste.

Will grumbled into his hands, feeling too much of everything at once. He felt too bold, too nervous, too—

“It seems like you have kept your promise,” lilted Hannibal, as he walked into the room, looking toward the direction of the cat, who had curled up and was sleeping.

“Your floors are heated,” said Will, making it a point that he listened not because of Hannibal.

“Your stubbornness is a marvel.”

“Good, get used to it.”

Hannibal climbed into the side beside Will, flicking off the lamp switch. Will turned on his side, nervously wringing his hands together, knowing nature was capricious.

Will let out a sound of surprise when he felt hands moving to his waist, gentle yet firm.

“Hannibal?”

Hannibal gave no reply which led Will to turn to face him. The older man was not drawled heavily in sleep yet, only minutely blinking in the dark for search of the lumen eyes. Will made some distance between them, just in case. Though Hannibal must’ve taken it as a sign that Will felt uncomfortable, as he slinked the firm hands away from Will’s waist.

“No wait,” started Will, going to explain himself. He tugged the wrists that were sliding away, pulling it back toward him.

“Promise me.”

“I always keep my promises.”

“That you won’t leave me,” whispered Will.

“I don’t see me anywhere you are not,” offered Hannibal.

“One more thing,” said Will, as he closed the distance between their lips.

Will’s fingers gently padded against Hannibal’s jawbone, dizzy from the stolen breaths in between. His shirt smelled of light rain and something serene. He moaned softly from the tenderness and shifted in Hannibal’s tightening hold. Hannibal’s fingers loosely twined Will’s curls, brushing his hair back from his forehead before he gently took a hold of Will’s chin.

As the two broke away the exchange, Will panted in a loss of air and breath, satisfied. He hugged his chest to Hannibal and dipped his head on his sternum.

“G’night, Hannibal,” murmured Will.

“Goodnight, Will,” whispered Hannibal.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for sticking with me for the very last chapter! I hope you all stick with me for my future works ◡̈.

And it’s true, where does an author have that their muse is not?

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!